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THE HAND OF ETHELBERTA

VOL. II.



SO ETHELERTA WENT.

S. M. M. Co.

THE HAND OF ETHELBERTA

A COMEDY IN CHAPTERS

BY

THOMAS HARDY

AUTHOR OF 'FAR FROM THE MADDING CROWD' ETC.

VITÆ POST-SCENIA CELANT—*Lucretius*

WITH ELEVEN ILLUSTRATIONS

IN TWO VOLUMES

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THE
HAND OF ETHELBERTA.

CHAPTER XXX.

ETHELBERTA'S—MR. CHICKEREL'S ROOM.

THE question of Neigh or no Neigh had reached a pitch of insistence which no longer permitted dallying, even by a popular beauty. His character was becoming defined to Ethelberta as something very differently composed from that of her first imagining. She had set him down to be a man whose habitual inexcitability owed nothing to self-repression, but stood as the natural uncoated margin of the mass within. As were the cliffs of her new domain, so were the quarries, she had thought. Neigh's urban torpor, she said, might have been in the first instance produced by art, but, were it thus, it had gone so far as to permeate rather than encrust him. This had been disproved, first surprisingly, by his reported statement; wondrously, in the second place, by his call upon her and sudden

proposal ; thirdly, to a degree simply astounding, by what had transpired in the city that day. For Neigh, before the fervour had subsided which was produced in him by her look and general power while reading ‘Paradise Lost,’ found himself alone with her in a nook outside the church, and there had almost demanded her promise to be his wife. She had replied by asking for time, and idly offering him the petals of her rose, that had shed themselves in her hand. Neigh, in taking them, pressed her fingers more warmly than she thought she had given him warrant for, which offended her. It was certainly a very momentary affair, and when it was over seemed to surprise himself almost as much as it had vexed her ; but it had reminded her of one truth which she was in danger of forgetting. The town gentleman was not half so far removed from Sol and Dan, and the hard-handed order in general, in his passions as in his philosophy. He still continued to be the male of his species, and when the heart was hot with a dream Pall Mall had much the same aspect as Wessex.

Well, she had not accepted him yet ; indeed, for the moment they were in a pet with one another. Yet that might soon be cleared off, and then recurred the perpetual question, would the advantage that might accrue to her people by her marriage be worth the sacrifice ? One palliative feature must be remembered when we survey the matrimonial ponderings of the

poetess and romancer. What she contemplated was not meanly to ensnare a husband just to provide incomes for her and her family, but to find some man she might respect, who would maintain her in such a stage of comfort as should, by setting her mind free from temporal anxiety, enable her to further organise her talent, and provide incomes for them herself. Plenty of saleable originality was left in her as yet, but it was getting crushed under the rubbish of her necessities.

She was not sure that Neigh would stand the test of her revelations. It would be possible to lead him to marry her without revealing anything—the events of the last few days had shown her that—yet Ethelberta's honesty shrank from the safe course of holding her tongue. It might be a pleasant surprise to many a modern gentleman of birth to find himself allied with a lady, none of whose ancestors had ever pandered to a court, lost an army, taken a bribe, oppressed a community, or broken a bank; but the added disclosure that, in avoiding these normal stains, her kindred had worked and continued to work with their hands for bread, might lead such an one to consider that the novelty was dearly purchased by a mover in circles from which the greatest ostraciser of all is servitude.

Ethelberta was, upon the whole, dissatisfied with her progress thus far. She had planned many things and fulfilled few. Had her father been by this time provided for and made independent of the world, as

she had thought he might be, not only would her course with regard to Neigh be quite clear, but the impending awkwardness of dining with her father behind her chair could not have occurred. True, that was a small matter beside her regret for his own sake that he was still in harness ; and a mere change of occupation would be but a tribute to a fastidiousness which he did not himself share. She had frequently tried to think of a vocation for him that would have a more dignified sound, and be less dangerously close to her own path : the post of care-taker at some provincial library, country stationer, registrar of births and deaths, and many others, had been discussed and dismissed in face of the unmanageable fact that her father was serenely happy and comfortable as a butler, looking with dread at any hint of change short of perfect retirement. Since, then, she could not offer him this retirement, what right had she to interfere with his mode of life at all ? In no other social groove on earth would he thrive as he throve in his present one, to which he had been accustomed from boyhood, and where the remuneration was actually greater than in professions ten times as stately in name.

For the rest, too, Ethelberta had indulged in hopes, the high education of the younger ones being the chief of these darling wishes. Picotee wanted looking to badly enough. Sol and Dan required no material help ; they had quickly obtained good places of work under

a Pimlico builder; for though the brothers scarcely showed as yet the light-fingered deftness of London artisans, the want was in a measure compensated by their painstaking, and employers are far from despising country hands who bring with them strength, industry, and a desire to please. But their sister had other lines laid down for them than those of level progress; to start them some day as masters instead of men was a long-cherished wish of Ethelberta's.

Thus she had quite enough machinery in her hands to keep decently going, even were she to marry a man who would take a kindly view of her peculiar situation, and afford her opportunities of strengthening her powers for her kindred's good. But what would be the result if, eighteen months hence—the date at which her occupation of the house in Connaught Crescent came to an end—she were still a widow, with no accumulated capital, her platform talents grown homely and stunted through narrow living, and her tender vein of poesy completely dispersed by it? To calmly relinquish the struggle at that point would have been the act of a stoic, but not of a woman, particularly when she considered the children, the hopes of her mother for them, and her own condition—though this was least—under the ironical cheers which would greet a slip back into the mire.

It here becomes necessary to turn for a moment to Master Joey Chickereel, Ethelberta's troublesome page

and brother. The face of this juvenile was that of a Græco-Roman satyr to the furthest degree of completeness. Viewed in front, the outer line of his upper lip rose in a double arch nearly to his little round nostrils, giving an expression of a jollity so delicious to himself as to compel a perpetual drawing in of his breath. During half-laughs his lips parted in the middle, and remained closed at the corners, which were small round pits like his nostrils, the same form being repeated as dimples a little further back upon his cheek. The opening for each eye formed a sparkling crescent, both upper and under lid having the convexity upwards.

But during some few days preceding the dinner-party at the Doncastles' all this changed. The luxuriant curves departed, a compressed lineality was to be observed everywhere, the pupils of his eyes seemed flattened, and the carriage of his head was limp and sideways. This was a feature so remarkable and new in him that Picotee noticed it, and was lifted from the melancholy current of her own affairs in contemplating his.

‘ Well, what’s the matter ? ’ said Picotee.

‘ Oh—nothing,’ said Joey.

‘ Nothing ? How can you say so ? ’

‘ The world’s a holler mockery—that’s what I say.’

‘ Yes, so it is, to some ; but not to you,’ said Picotee, sighing.

‘ Don’t talk argument, Picotee. I only hope you’ll

never feel what I feel now. If it wasn't for my juties here I know what I'd do ; I'd 'list, that's what I'd do. But having my position to fill here as the only responsible manservant in the house, I can't leave.'

'Has anybody been beating you?'

'Beating! Do I look like a person who gets beatings? No, it is a madness,' said Joey, putting his hand upon his chest. 'The case is, I am in love.'

'O Joey, a boy no bigger than you are!' said Picotee, reprovingly. Her personal interest in the passion, however, provoked her to enquire, in the next breath, 'Who is it? Do tell, Joey.'

'No bigger than I! What hev bigness to do with it? That's just like your old-fashioned notions. Bigness is no more wanted in courting now-a-days than in soldiering or smoking or any other duty of man. Husbands is rare ; and a promising courter who means business will fetch his price in these times, big or small, I assure ye. I might have been engaged a dozen times over as far as the bigness goes. You should see what a miserable little fellow my rival is afore you talk like that. Now you know I've got a rival, perhaps you'll own there must be something in it.'

'Yes, that seems like the real thing. But who is the young woman?'

'Well, I don't mind telling you, Picotee. It is Mrs. Doncastle's new maid. I called to see father last night, and had supper there ; and you should have

seed how lovely she were—eating sparrowgrass sideways, as if she were born to it. But, of course, there's a rival—there always is—I might have known that, and I will crush him !'

'But Mrs. Doncastle's new maid—if that was she I caught a glimpse of the other day—is ever so much older than you—a dozen years.'

'What's that to a man in love? Pooh—I wish you would leave me, Picotee ; I wants to be alone.'

A short time after this Picotee was in the company of Ethelberta, and she took occasion to mention Joey's attachment. Ethelberta grew exceedingly angry directly she heard of it.

'What a fearful nuisance that boy is becoming,' she said. 'Does father know anything of this?'

'I think not,' said Picotee. 'Oh no, he cannot ; he would not allow any such thing to go on ; she is so much older than Joey.'

'I should think he wouldn't allow it ! The fact is, I must be more strict about this growing friendliness between you all and the Doncastle servants. There shall be absolutely no intimacy or visiting of any sort. When father wants to see any of you he must come here, unless there is a most serious reason for your calling upon him. Some disclosure, or reference to me otherwise than as your mistress, will certainly be made else, and then I am ruined. I will speak to father myself about Joey's absurd nonsense this evening. I

am going to see him on another matter.' And Ethelberta sighed. 'I am to dine there on Thursday,' she added.

'To dine there, Berta? Well, that is a strange thing! Why, father will be close to you!'

'Yes,' said Ethelberta, quietly.

'How I should like to see you sitting at a grand dinner-table, among lordly dishes and shining people, and father about the room unnoticed! Berta, I have never seen a dinner-party in my life, and father said that I should some day; he promised me long ago.'

'How will he be able to carry out that, my dear child?' said Ethelberta, drawing her sister gently to her side.

'Father says that for an hour and half the guests are quite fixed in the dining-room, and as unlikely to move as if they were trees planted round the table. Do let me go and see you, Berta,' Picotee added, coaxingly. 'I would give anything to see how you look in the midst of elegant people talking and laughing, and you my own sister all the time, and me looking on like puss-in-the-corner.'

Ethelberta could hardly resist the entreaty, in spite of her recent resolution.

'We will leave that to be considered when I come home to-night,' she said. 'I must hear what father says.'

After dark the same evening a woman, dressed in

plain black and wearing a hood, went to the servants' entrance of Mr. Doncastle's house, and enquired for Mr. Chickereel. Ethelberta found him in a room by himself, and on entering she closed the door behind her, and unwrapped her face.

'Can you sit with me a few minutes, father?' she said.

'Yes, for a quarter of an hour or so,' said the butler. 'Has anything happened? I thought it might be Picotee.'

'No. All's well yet. But I thought it best to see you upon one or two matters which are harassing me a little just now. The first is, that stupid boy Joey has got entangled in some way with the lady's-maid at this house; a ridiculous affair it must be by all account, but it is too serious for me to treat lightly. She will worm everything out of him, and a pretty business it will be then.'

'God bless my soul! why, the woman is old enough to be his mother! I have never heard a sound of it till now. What do you propose to do?'

'I have hardly thought: I cannot tell at all. But we will consider that after I have done. The next thing is, I am to dine here Thursday—that is, to-morrow.'

'You going to dine here, are you?' said her father in surprise. 'Dear me, that's news. We have

a dinner-party to-morrow, but I was not aware that you knew our people.'

'I have accepted the invitation,' said Ethelberta. 'But if you think I had better stay away, I will get out of it by some means. Heavens! what does that mean—will anybody come in?' she added, rapidly pulling up her hood and jumping from the seat as the loud tones of a bell clanged forth in startling proximity.

'Oh no—it is all safe,' said her father. 'It is the area door—nothing to do with me. About the dinner: I don't see why you may not come. Of course you will take no notice of me, nor shall I of you. It is to be rather a large party. Lord What's-his-name is coming, and several good people.'

'Yes; he is coming to meet me, it appears. But, father,' she said more softly and slowly, 'how wrong it will be for me to come so close to you, and never recognise you! I don't like it. I wish you could have given up service by this time; it would have been so much less painful for us all round. I thought we might have been able to manage it somehow.'

'Nonsense, nonsense,' said Mr. Chickereel, crossly. 'There is not the least reason why I should give up. I want to save a little money first. If you don't like me as I am, you must keep away from me. Don't be uneasy about my comfort; I am right enough, thank God. I can mind myself for many a year yet.'

Ethelberta looked at him with tears in her eyes, but she did not speak. She never could help crying when she met her father here.

‘I have been in service now for more than seven-and-thirty years,’ her father went on. ‘It is an honourable calling; and why should you maintain me because you can earn a few pounds by your gifts, and an old woman left you her house and a few sticks of furniture? If she had left you any money it would have been a different thing, but as you have to work for every penny you get, I cannot think of it. Suppose I should agree to come and live with you, and then you should be ill, or such like, and I no longer able to help myself? Oh no, I’ll stick where I am, for here I am safe as to food and shelter at any rate. Surely, Ethelberta, it is only right that I, who ought to keep you all, should at least keep your mother and myself? As to our position, that we cannot help; and I don’t mind that you are unable to own me.’

‘I wish I could own you—all of you.’

‘Well you chose your course, my dear; and you must abide by it. Having put your hand to the plough, it will be foolish to turn back.’

‘It would, I suppose. Yet I wish I could get a living by some simple humble occupation, and drop the name of Petherwin, and be Berta Chickerel again, and live in a green cottage as we used to do when I was small. I am miserable to a pitiable degree sometimes,

and sink into regrets that I ever fell into such a groove as this. I don't like covert deeds, such as coming here to-night, and many are necessary with me from time to time. There is something without which splendid energies are a drug; and that is a cold heart. There is another thing necessary to energy, too—the power of distinguishing your visions from your reasonable forecasts when looking into the future, so as to allow your energy to lay hold of the forecasts only. I begin to have a fear that mother is right when she implies that I undertook to carry out visions and all. But ten of us are so many to cope with. If God Almighty had only killed off three-quarters of us when we were little, a body might have done something for the rest; but as we are it is hopeless!

‘There is no use in your going into high doctrine like that,’ said Chickerel. ‘As I said before, you chose your course. You have begun to fly high, and you had better keep there.’

‘And to do that there is only one way—that is, to do it surely, so that I have some groundwork to enable me to keep up to the mark in my profession. That way is marriage.’

‘Marriage? Who are you going to marry?’

‘God knows. Perhaps Lord Mountclere. Stranger things have happened.’

‘Yes, so they have; though not many wretcheder things. I would sooner see you in your grave, Ethel-

berta, than Lord Mountclere's wife, or the wife of anybody like him, great as the honour would be.'

'Of course that was only something to say; I don't know the man even.'

'I know his valet. However, marry who you may, I hope you'll be happy, my dear girl. You would be still more divided from us in that event; but when your mother and I are dead, it will make little difference.'

Ethelberta placed her hand upon his shoulder, and smiled cheerfully. 'Now, father, don't despond. All will be well, and we shall see no such misfortune as that for many a year. Leave all to me. I am a rare hand at contrivances.'

'You are indeed, Berta. It seems to me quite wonderful that we should be living so near together and nobody suspect the relationship, because of the precautions you have taken.'

'Yet the precautions were rather Lady Petherwin's than mine, as you know. Consider how she kept me abroad. My marriage being so secret made it easy to cut off all traces, unless anybody had made it a special business to search for them. That people should suspect as yet would be by far the more wonderful thing of the two. But we must, for one thing, have no visiting between our girls and the servants here, or they soon will suspect.'

Ethelberta then laid down a few laws on the sub-

ject, and, explaining the other details of her visit, told her father soon that she must leave him.

He took her along the passage and into the area. They were standing at the bottom of the steps, saying a few parting words about Picotée's visit to see the dinner, when a female figure appeared by the railing above, slipped in at the gate, and flew down the steps past the father and daughter. At the moment of passing she whispered breathlessly to him, 'Is that you, Mr. Chickereel?'

'Yes,' said the butler.

She tossed into his arms a quantity of wearing apparel, and adding, 'Please take them upstairs for me—I am late,' rushed into the house.

'Good heavens, what does that mean?' said Ethelberta, holding her father's arm in her uneasiness.

'That's the new lady's-maid, just come in from an evening walk—that young scamp's sweetheart, if what you tell me is true. I don't yet know what her character is, but she runs neck and neck with time closer than any woman I ever met. She stays out at night like this till the last moment, and often throws off her dashing courting-clothes in this way, as she runs down the steps, to save a journey to the top of the house to her room before going to Mrs. Doncastle's, who is in fact at this minute waiting for her. Only look here.' Chickereel gathered up a hat decked with feathers and flowers, a parasol, and a light muslin train-skirt, out of

the pocket of the latter tumbling some long golden tresses of hair.

‘What an extraordinary woman,’ said Ethelberta. ‘A perfect Cinderella. The idea of Joey getting desperate about a woman like that; no doubt she has just come in from meeting him.’

‘No doubt—a blockhead. That’s his taste, is it! I’ll soon see if I can’t cure his taste if it inclines towards Mrs. Menlove.’

‘Mrs. what?’

‘Menlove; that’s her name. She came about a fortnight ago.’

‘And is that Menlove—what shall we do?’ exclaimed Ethelberta. ‘The idea of the boy singling out her—why it is ruin to him, to me, and to us all!’

She hastily explained to her father that Menlove had been Lady Petherwin’s maid and her own at some time before the death of her mother-in-law, that she had only stayed with them through a three months’ tour because of her flightiness, and hence had learnt nothing of Ethelberta’s history, and probably had never thought at all about it. But nevertheless they were as well acquainted as a lady and her maid well could be in the time. ‘Like all such doubtful characters,’ continued Ethelberta, ‘she was one of the cleverest and lightest-handed women we ever had about us. When she first came, my hair was getting quite weak; but by brushing it every day in a peculiar manner, and

treating it as only she knew how, she brought it into splendid condition.'

'Well, this is the devil to pay, upon my life!' said Mr. Chickereel, with a miserable gaze at the bundle of clothes and the general situation at the same time. 'Unfortunately for her friendship, I have snubbed her two or three times already, for I don't care about her manner. You know she has a way of trading on a man's sense of honour till it puts him into an awkward position. She is perfectly well aware that, whatever scrape I find her out in, I shall not have the conscience to report her, because I am a man, and she is a defenceless woman; and so she takes advantage of one's feeling by making me, or either of the men-servants, her bottleholder, as you see she has done now.'

'This is all simply dreadful,' said Ethelberta. 'Joey is shrewd and trustworthy; but in the hands of such a woman as that! I suppose she did not recognise me.'

'There was no chance of that in the dark.'

'Well, I cannot do anything in it,' said she. 'I cannot manage Joey at all.'

'I will see if I can,' said Mr. Chickereel. 'Courting at his age, indeed—what shall we hear next!'

Chickereel then accompanied his daughter along the street till an empty cab passed them, and putting her into it he returned to the house again.

CHAPTER XXXI.

ETHELBERTA'S DRESSING-ROOM—MR. DONCASTLE'S HOUSE.

THE dressing of Ethelberta for the dinner-party was an undertaking into which Picotee threw her whole skill as tire-woman. Her energies were brisker that day than they had been at any time since the Julians first made preparations for departure from town; for a letter had come to her from Faith, telling of their arrival at the old cathedral city, which was found to suit their inclinations and habits infinitely better than London; and that she would like Picotee to visit them there some day. Picotee felt, and so probably felt the writer of the letter, that such a visit would not be very practicable just now; but it was a pleasant idea, and for fastening dreams upon was better than nothing.

Such musings were encouraged also by Ethelberta's remarks as the dressing went on.

'We will have a change soon,' she said; 'we will go out of town for a few days. It will do good in many ways. I am getting so alarmed about the health of the children; their faces are becoming so white and thin

and pinched that an old acquaintance would hardly know them ; and they were so plump when they came. You are looking as pale as a ghost, and I daresay I am too. A week or two at Knollsea will set us right.'

'Oh, how charming!' said Picotee, gladly.

Knollsea was a village on the coast, not very far from Melchester, the new home of Christopher ; not very far, that is to say, in the eye of a sweetheart ; but seeing that there was, as the crow flies, a stretch of thirty-five miles between the two places, and that more than one-third the distance was without a railway, an elderly gentleman might have considered their situations somewhat remote from each other.

'Why have you chosen Knollsea?' enquired Picotee.

'Because of aunt's letter from Rouen—have you seen it?'

'I did not read it through.'

'She wants us to get a copy of the register of her baptism ; and she is not absolutely certain which of the parishes in and about Knollsea they were living in when she was born. Mother, being a year younger, cannot tell of course. First I thought of writing to the clergyman of each parish, but that would be troublesome, and might reveal the secret of my birth ; but if we go down there for a few days, and take some lodgings, we shall be able to find out all about it at leisure. Gwendoline and Joey can attend to mother and the

people downstairs, especially as father will look in every evening until he goes out of town, to see if they are getting on properly. It will be such a weight off my soul to slip away from acquaintances here.'

'Will it?'

'Yes. At the same time I ought not to speak so, for they have been very kind. I wish we could go to Rouen afterwards; aunt repeats her invitation as usual. However, there is time enough to think of that.'

Ethelberta was dressed at last, and, beholding the lonely look of poor Picotee when about to leave the room, she could not help having a sympathetic feeling that it was rather hard for her sister to be denied so small an enjoyment as a menial peep at a feast when she herself was to sit down to it as guest.

'If you still want to go and see the procession downstairs you may do so,' she said reluctantly; 'provided that you take care of your tongue when you come in contact with Menlove, and adhere to father's instructions as to how long you may stay. It may be in the highest degree unwise; but never mind, go.'

Then Ethelberta departed for the scene of action, just at the hour of the sun's lowest decline, when it was fading away, yellow and mild as candle-light, and when upper windows facing north-west reflected dissolving views of tawny cloud with brazen edges, the original picture of the same being hidden from sight by soiled walls and slaty slopes.

Before entering the presence of host and hostess, Ethelberta contrived to exchange a few words with her father.

‘In excellent time,’ he whispered, full of paternal pride at the superb audacity of her situation here in relation to his. ‘About half of them are come.’

‘Mr. Neigh?’

‘Not yet; he’s coming.’

‘Lord Mountclere?’

‘Yes. He came absurdly early; ten minutes before anybody else, so that Mrs. D. could hardly get on her bracelets and things soon enough to scramble down stairs and receive him; and he’s as nervous as a boy. Keep up your spirits dear, and don’t mind me.’

‘I will, father. And let Picotee see me at dinner if you can. She is very anxious to look at me. She will be here directly.’

And Ethelberta, having been announced, joined the chamberful of assembled guests, among whom for the present we lose sight of her.

Meanwhile the evening outside the house was deepening in tone, and the lamps began to blink up. Her sister having departed, Picotee hastily arrayed herself in a little black jacket and chip hat, and tripped across the park to the same point. Chickerel had directed a maid-servant known as Jane to receive his humbler daughter and make her comfortable; and that friendly person, who spoke as if she had known Picotee

five-and-twenty years, took her to the housekeeper's room, where the visitor deposited her jacket and hat, and rested awhile.

A quick-eyed, light-haired, slight-built woman came in when Jane had gone. 'Are you Miss Chickereel?' she said to Picotee.

'Yes,' said Picotee, guessing that this was Menlove, and fearing her a little.

'Jane tells me that you have come to visit your father, and would like to look at the company going to dinner. Well, they are not much to see, you know; but such as they are you are welcome to the sight of. Come along with me.'

'I think I would rather wait for father, if you will excuse me, please.'

'Your father is busy now; it is no use for you to think of saying anything to him.'

Picotee followed her guide up a back staircase to the height of several flights, and then, crossing a landing, they descended to the upper part of the front stairs.

'Now look over the balustrade, and you will see them all in a minute,' said Mrs. Menlove. 'Oh, you need not be timid; you can look out as far as you like. We are all independent here; no slavery for us: it is not as it is in the country, where servants are considered to be of different blood and bone from their employers, and to have no eyes for anything but their work. Here they are coming.'

Picotée then had the pleasure of looking down upon a series of human crowns—some black, some white, some strangely built upon, some smooth and shining—descending the staircase in disordered column and great discomfort, their owners trying to talk, but breaking off in the midst of syllables to look to their footing. The young girl's eyes had not drooped over the handrail more than a few moments when she softly exclaimed, 'There she is, there she is! How lovely she looks, does she not?'

'Who?' said Mrs. Menlove.

Picotée recollected herself, and hastily drew in her impulses. 'My dear mistress,' she said blandly. 'That is she on Mr. Doncastle's arm. And look, who is that funny old man the elderly lady is helping downstairs.'

'He is our honoured guest, Lord Mountclere. Mrs. Doncastle will have him all through the dinner, and after that he will devote himself to Mrs. Petherwin, your "dear mistress." He keeps looking towards her now, and no doubt thinks it a nuisance that she is not with him. Well, it is useless to stay here. Come a little further—we'll follow them.' Menlove began to lead the way downstairs, but Picotée held back.

'Won't they see us?' she said.

'No. And if they do, it doesn't matter. Mrs. Doncastle would not object in the least to the daughter of her respected head man being accidentally seen in the hall.'

They descended to the bottom and stood in the hall. 'Oh, there's father!' whispered Picotee, with childlike gladness, as Chickereel became visible to her by the door. The butler nodded to his daughter, and became again engrossed in his duties.

'I wish I could see her—my mistress—again,' said Picotee.

'You seem mightily concerned about your mistress,' said Menlove. 'Do you want to see if you have dressed her properly?'

'Yes, partly; and I like her, too. She is very kind to me.'

'You will have a chance of seeing her soon. When the door is nicely open you can look in for a moment. I must leave you now for a few minutes, but I will come again.'

Menlove departed, and Picotee stood waiting. She wondered how Ethelberta was getting on, and whether she enjoyed herself as much as it seemed her duty to do in such a superbly hospitable place. Picotee then turned her attention to the hall, every article of furniture therein appearing worthy of scrutiny to her unaccustomed eyes. Here she walked and looked about for a long time, till an excellent opportunity offered itself of seeing how affairs progressed in the dining-room.

Through the partly-opened door there became visible a sideboard which first attracted her attention by its richness. It was, indeed, a noticeable example

of modern art-workmanship, in being exceptionally large, with curious ebony mouldings at different stages; and, while the heavy cupboard-doors at the bottom were enriched with inlays of paler wood, other panels were decorated with tiles, as if the massive composition had been erected on the spot as part of the solid building. However, it was on a space higher up that Picotee's eyes and thoughts were fixed. In the great mirror above the middle ledge she could see reflected the upper part of the dining-room, and this suggested to her that she might see Ethelberta and the other guests reflected in the same way by standing on a chair, which, quick as thought, she did.

To Picotee's dazed young vision her beautiful sister appeared as the chief figure of a glorious pleasure-parliament of both sexes, surrounded by whole regiments of candles grouped here and there about the room. She and her companions were seated before a large flower-bed, or small hanging garden, fixed at about the level of the elbow, the attention of all being concentrated rather upon the uninteresting margin of the bed, and upon each other, than on the beautiful natural objects growing in the middle, as it seemed to Picotee. In the buzz of conversation Ethelberta's clear voice could occasionally be heard, and her young sister could see that her eyes were bright, and her face beaming, as if divers social wants and looming penuriousness had never been within her experience. Mr. Doncastle was

quite absorbed in what she was saying. So was the queer old man whom Menlove had called Lord Mountclere.

‘The dashing widow looks very well, does she not?’ said a person at Picotee’s elbow.

It was her conductor Menlove, now returned again, whom Picotee had quite forgotten.

‘She will do some damage here to-night you will find,’ continued Menlove. ‘How long have you been with her?’

‘Oh, a long time—I mean rather a short time,’ stammered Picotee.

‘I know her well enough. I was her maid once, or rather her mother-in-law’s, but that was long before you knew her. I did not by any means find her so lovable as you seem to think her when I had to do with her at close quarters. An awful flirt—awful. Don’t you find her so?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘If you don’t yet you will know. But come down from your perch—the dining-room door will not be open again for some time—and I will show you about the rooms upstairs. This is a larger house than Mrs. Petherwin’s, as you see. Just come and look at the drawing-rooms.’

Wishing much to get rid of Menlove, yet fearing to offend her, Picotee followed upstairs. Dinner was almost over by this time, and when they entered the

front drawing-room a young man-servant and maid were there rekindling the lights.

‘Now let’s have a game of cat-and-mice,’ said the maid-servant, cheerily. ‘There’s plenty of time before they come up.’

‘Agreed,’ said Menlove, promptly. ‘You will play, will you not, Miss Chickerel?’

‘No, indeed,’ said Picotee, aghast.

‘Never mind, then ; you look on.’

Away then ran the housemaid and Menlove, and the young footman started at their heels. Round the room, over the furniture, under the furniture, through the furniture, out of one window, along the balcony, in at another window, again round the room—so they glided with the swiftness of swallows and the noiselessness of ghosts.

Then the housemaid drew a jew’s-harp from her pocket, and struck up a lively waltz *sotto voce*. The footman seized Menlove, who appeared nothing loth, and began spinning gently round the room with her, to the time of the fascinating measure

Which fashion hails, from countesses to queens,
And maids and valets dance behind the scenes.

Picotee, who had been accustomed to unceiled country cottages all her life, wherein the scamper of a mouse is heard distinctly from floor to floor, exclaimed, in a terrified whisper at viewing all this, ‘They’ll hear

you underneath. they'll hear you, and we shall all be ruined !'

'Not at all,' came from the cautious dancers. 'These are some of the best built houses in London—double floors. filled in with material that will deaden any row you like to make, and we make none. But come and have a turn yourself, Miss Chickereel.'

The young man relinquished Menlove, and on the spur of the moment seized Picotee. Picotee flounced away from him in indignation, backing into a corner with ruffled feathers, like a pullet trying to appear a hen.

'How dare you touch me !' she said, with rounded eyes. 'I'll tell somebody downstairs of you, who'll soon see about it.'

'What a baby ; she'll tell her father.'

'No I shan't ; somebody you are all afraid of, that's who I'll tell.'

'Nonsense,' said Menlove ; 'he meant no harm.'

Playtime was now getting short, and further antics being dangerous on that account, the performers retired again downstairs, Picotee of necessity following. Her nerves were screwed up to the highest pitch of uneasiness by the grotesque habits of these men and maids, who were quite unlike the country servants she had known, and resembled nothing so much as pixies, elves, or gnomes, peeping up upon human beings from their shady haunts underground, sometimes for good, some-

times for ill—sometimes doing heavy work, sometimes none; teasing and worrying with impish laughter half suppressed, and vanishing directly mortal eyes were bent on them. Separate and distinct from overt existence under the sun, this life could hardly be without its distinctive pleasures, all of them being more or less pervaded by thrills and titillations from games of hazard, and the perpetual risk of sensational surprises.

Long before this time Picotee had begun to be anxious to get home again, but Menlove seemed particularly to desire her company, and pressed her to sit awhile, telling her young friend, by way of entertainment, of various extraordinary love adventures in which she had figured as heroine when travelling on the Continent. These stories had one and all a remarkable likeness in a certain point—Menlove was always unwilling to love the adorer, and the adorer was always unwilling to live afterwards on account of it.

‘Ha—ha—ha!’ in men’s voices was heard from the distant dining-room as the two women went on talking.

‘And then,’ continued Menlove, ‘there was that duel I was the cause of between the courier and the French valet. Dear me, what a trouble that was; yet I could do nothing to prevent it. This courier was a very handsome man—they are handsome sometimes.’

‘Yes, they are. My aunt married one.’

‘Did she? Where do they live?’

‘They keep an hotel at Rouen,’ murmured Picotee, in doubt whether this should have been told or not.

‘Well, he used to follow me to the English Church every Sunday regularly, and I was so determined not to give my hand where my heart could never be, that I slipped out at the other door while he stood expecting me by the one I entered. Here I met M. Pierre, when, as ill luck would have it, the other came round the corner, and seeing me talking to the valet, he challenged him at once.’

‘Ha—ha—ha!’ was heard again afar.

‘Did they fight?’ said Picotee.

‘Yes, I believe they did. We left Nice the next day; but I heard some time after of a duel not many miles off, and although I could not get hold of the names, I make no doubt it was between those two gentlemen. I never knew which of them fell; poor fellow, whichever it was.’

‘Ha—ha—ha—ha—ha—ha!’ came from the dining-room.

‘Whatever are those boozy men laughing at, I wonder?’ said Menlove. ‘They are always so noisy when the ladies have gone upstairs. Upon my soul, I’ll run up and find out.’

‘No, no, don’t,’ entreated Picotee, putting her hand on her entertainer’s arm. ‘It seems wrong; it is no concern of ours.’

‘Wrong be hanged—anything on an impulse,’ said

Mrs. Menlove, skipping across the room and out of the door, which stood open, as did others in the house, the evening being sultry and oppressive.

Picotee waited in her seat until it occurred to her that she could escape the lady's maid by going off into her father's pantry in her absence. But before this had been put into effect Menlove appeared again.

'Such fun as they are having up there,' she said. 'Somebody asked Mr. Neigh to tell a story which he had told at some previous time, but he was very reluctant to do so, and pretended he could not recollect it. Well, then, the other man—I could not distinguish him by his voice—began telling it, to prompt Mr. Neigh's memory; and, as far as I could understand, it was about some lady who thought Mr. Neigh was in love with her, and, to find whether he was worth accepting or not, she went with her maid at night to see his estate, and wandered about and got lost, and was frightened, and I don't know what besides. Then Mr. Neigh laughed too, and said he liked such common sense in a woman. No names were mentioned, but I fancy, from the awkwardness of Mr. Neigh at being compelled to tell it, that the lady is one of those in the drawing-room. I should like to know which it was.'

'I know—have heard something about it,' said Picotee, blushing with anger. 'It was nothing at all like that. I wonder Mr. Neigh had the audacity ever

to talk of the matter, and to misrepresent it so greatly.'

'Tell all about it, do,' said Menlove.

'Oh no,' said Picotee. 'I promised not to say a word.'

'It is your mistress, I expect.'

'You may think what you like; but the lady is anything but a mistress of mine.'

The flighty Menlove pressed her to tell the whole story, but finding this useless the subject was changed. Presently her father came in, and, taking no notice of Menlove, told his daughter that she had been called for. Picotee very readily put on her things, and on going outside found Joey awaiting her. Mr. Chickereel followed closely, with sharp glances from the corner of his eye, and it was plain from Joey's nervous manner of lingering in the shadows of the area doorway instead of entering the house, that the butler had in some way set himself to prevent all communion between the fair lady's-maid and his son for that evening at least.

He watched Picotee and her brother off the premises, and the pair went on their way towards Connaught Crescent, very few words passing between them. Picotee's thoughts had turned to the proposed visit to Knollsea, and Joey was sulky under disappointment, and the blank of thwarted purposes.

CHAPTER XXXII.

ON THE HOUSETOP.

‘PICOTEE, are you asleep?’ Ethelberta whispered softly at dawn the next morning, by the half-opened door of her sister’s bedroom.

‘No, I keep waking, it is so warm.’

‘So do I. Suppose we get up and see the sun rise. The east is filling with flame.’

‘Yes, I should like it,’ said Picotee.

The restlessness which had brought Ethelberta hither in slippers and dressing-gown at such an early hour owed its origin to other causes than the warmth of the weather; but of that she did not speak as yet. Picotee’s room was an attic, with windows in the roof—a chamber dismal enough at all times, and very shadowy now. While Picotee was wrapping up Ethelberta placed a chair under the window, and mounting upon this they stepped outside, and seated themselves within the parapet.

The air was as clear and fresh as on a mountain side; sparrows chattered, and birds of a species unsuspected at later hours could be heard singing in the

park hard by, while here and there on ridges and flats a cat might be seen going calmly home from the devilries of the night to resume the amiabilities of the day.

‘I am so sorry I was asleep when you reached home,’ said Picotee. ‘I was so anxious to tell you something I heard of, and to know what you did; but my eyes would shut, try as I might, and then I tried no longer. Did you see me at all, Berta?’

‘Never once. I had an impression that you were there. I fancied you were from father’s carefully vacuous look whenever I glanced at his face. But were you careful about what you said, and did you see Menlove? I felt all the time that I had done wrong in letting you come; the gratification to you was not worth the risk to me.’

‘I saw her, and talked to her. But I am certain she suspected nothing. I enjoyed myself very much, and there was no risk at all.’

‘I am glad it is no worse news. However, you must not go there again; upon that point I am determined.’

‘It was a good thing I did go, all the same. I’ll tell you why when you have told me what happened to you.’

‘Nothing of importance happened to me.’

‘I expect you got to know the lord you were to meet?’

‘O yes—Lord Mountclere.’

‘And it’s dreadful how fond he is of you—quite ridiculously taken up with you—I saw that well enough. Such an old man, too; I wouldn’t have him for the world.’

‘Don’t jump at conclusions so absurdly, Picotee. Why wouldn’t you have him for the world?’

‘Because he is old enough to be my grandfather, and yours, too.’

‘Indeed he is not; he is only middle-aged.’

‘O Berta! Sixty-five at least.’

‘He may or may not be that; and if he is, it is not old. He is so entertaining that one forgets all about age in connection with him.’

‘He laughs like this—“Hee-hee-hee!”’ Picotee introduced as much antiquity into her face as she could by screwing it up and suiting the action to the word.

‘This very odd thing occurred,’ said Ethelberta, to get Picotee off the track of Lord Mountclere’s peculiarities, as it seemed. ‘I was saying to Mr. Neigh that we were going to Knollsea for a time, feeling that he would not be likely to know anything about such an out-of-the-way place, when Lord Mountclere, who was near, said, “I shall be at Lychworth Court in a few days, probably at the time you are at Knollsea. The Imperial Archæological Association holds its meetings in that part of Wessex this season, and Coomb Castle, near Knollsea, is one of the places on our list.” Then he hoped I should be able to attend. Did you ever

hear anything so strange? Now, I should like to attend very much, not on Lord Mountclere's account, but because such gatherings are interesting, and I have never been to one; yet there is this to be considered, would it be right for me to go without a friend to such a place? Another point is, that we shall live in menagerie style at Knollsea for the sake of the children, and we must do it economically in case we accept Aunt Charlotte's invitation to Rouen; hence, if he or his friends find us out there it will be awkward for me. So the alternative is Knollsea or some other place for us.'

'Let it be Knollsea, now we have once settled it,' said Picotee, anxiously. 'I have mentioned to Faith Julian that we shall be there.'

'Mentioned it already? You must have written instantly.'

'I had a few minutes to spare, and I thought I might as well write.'

'Very well; we will stick to Knollsea,' said Ethelberta, half in doubt. 'Yes—otherwise it will be difficult to see about aunt's baptismal certificate. We will hope nobody will take the trouble to pry into our household. . . . And now, Picotee, I want to ask you something—something very serious. How would you like me to marry Mr. Neigh?'

Ethelberta could not help laughing with a faint shyness as she asked the question under the searching

east ray. 'He has asked me to marry him,' she continued, 'and I want to know what you would say to such an arrangement. I don't mean to imply that the event is certain to take place; but, as a mere supposition, what do you say to it, Picotee?' Ethelberta was far from putting this matter before Picotee for advice or opinion; but, like all people who have an innate dislike to hole-and-corner policy, she felt compelled to speak of it to some one.

'I should not like him for you at all,' said Picotee, vehemently. 'I would rather you had Mr. Ladywell.'

'Oh, don't name him!'

'I wouldn't have Mr. Neigh at any price, nevertheless. It is about him that I was going to tell you.' Picotee proceeded to relate Menlove's account of the story of Ethelberta's escapade, which had been dragged from Neigh the previous evening by the friend to whom he had related it before he was so enamoured of Ethelberta as to regard that performance as a positive virtue in her. 'Nobody was told, or even suspected, who the lady of the anecdote was,' Picotee concluded; 'but I knew instantly, of course, and I think it very unfortunate that we ever went to that dreadful ghostly estate of his, Berta.'

Ethelberta's face heated with mortification. She had no fear that Neigh had told names or other particulars which might lead to her identification by any friend of his, and she could make allowance for bursts

of confidence; but there remained the awkward fact that he himself knew her to be the heroine of the episode. What annoyed her most was that Neigh could ever have looked upon her indiscretion as a humorous incident, which he certainly must have done at some time or other to account for his telling it. Had he been angry with her, or sneered at her for going, she could have forgiven him; but to see her manœuvre in the light of a joke, to use it as illustrating his grim theory of womankind, and neither to like nor to dislike her the more for it from first to last, this was to treat her with a cynicism which was intolerable. That Neigh's use of the incident as a stock anecdote ceased long before he had decided to ask her to marry him she made no doubt, but it showed that his love for her was of that sort in which passion makes war upon judgment, and prevails in spite of will. Moreover, he might have been speaking ironically when he alluded to the act as a virtue in a woman, which seemed the more likely when she remembered his cool bearing towards her in the drawing-room. Possibly it was an antipathetic reaction, induced by the renewed recollection of her proceeding.

‘I will never marry Mr. Neigh!’ she said with decision. ‘That shall settle it. You need not think over any such contingency, Picotee. He is one of those horrid men who love with their eyes, the remainder part of him objecting all the time to the

feeling ; and even if his objections prove the weaker, and the man marries, his general nature conquers again by the time the wedding trip is over, so that the woman is miserable at last, and had better not have had him at all.'

'That applies still more to Lord Mountclere, to my thinking. I never saw anything like the look of his eyes upon you.'

'Oh, no, no—you understand nothing if you say that. But one thing be sure of, there is no marriage likely to take place between myself and Mr. Neigh. I have longed for a sound reason for disliking him, and now I have got it. Well, we will talk no more of this—let us think of the nice little pleasure we have in store—our stay at Knollsea. There we will be as free as the wind. And when we are down there, I can drive across to Coomb Castle if I wish to attend the Imperial Association meeting, and nobody will know where I came from. Knollsea is not more than five miles from the Castle, I think.'

Picotee was by this time beginning to yawn, and Ethelberta did not feel nearly so wakeful as she had felt half an hour earlier. Tall and swarthy columns of smoke were now soaring up from the kitchen chimneys around, spreading horizontally when at a great height, and forming a roof of haze which was turning the sun to a copper colour, and by degrees spoiling the sweetness of the new atmosphere that had rolled in from the

country during the night, giving it the usual city smell. The resolve to make this rising the beginning of a long and busy day, which should set them beforehand with the rest of the world, weakened with their growing weariness, and an impulse to lie down just for a quarter of an hour before dressing ended in a sound sleep that did not relinquish its hold upon them till late in the forenoon.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

KNOLLSEA—A LOFTY DOWN—A RUINED CASTLE.

KNOLLSEA was a seaside village lying snug within two headlands as between a finger and thumb. Everybody in the parish who was not a boatman was a quarrier, unless he were the gentleman who owned half the property and had been a quarryman, or the other gentleman who owned the other half, and had been to sea.

The knowledge of the inhabitants was of the same special sort as their pursuits. The quarrymen in white fustian understood practical geology, the laws and accidents of dips, faults, and cleavage, better than the simplest ways of the world and mammon; the men in Guernsey frocks had a clearer notion of Alexandria, Constantinople, the Cape, and the Indies than of any inland town in their own country. This, for them, consisted of a busy portion, the Channel, where they lived and laboured, and a dull portion, the vague unexplored miles of interior at the back of the ports, which they seldom thought of.

Some wives of the village, it is true, had learned to

let lodgings, and others to keep shops. The doors of these little places were formed of an upper hatch, usually kept open, and a lower hatch, with a bell attached, usually kept shut. Whenever a stranger went in, he would hear a whispering of astonishment from a back room, after which a woman came forward, looking suspiciously at him as an intruder, and advancing slowly enough to allow her mouth to get cleared of the meal she was partaking of. Meanwhile the people in the back room would stop their knives and forks in absorbed curiosity as to the reason of the stranger's entry, who by this time feels ashamed of his unwarrantable intrusion into this hermit's cell, and thinks he must take his hat off. The woman is quite alarmed at seeing that he is not one of the fifteen native women and children who alone patronise her, and nervously puts her hand to the side of her face, which she carries slanting. The visitor finds himself saying what he wants in an apologetic tone, when the woman tells him that they did keep that article once, but do not now; that nobody does, and probably never will again; and as he turns away she looks relieved that the dilemma of having to provide for a stranger has passed off with no worse mishaps than that of disappointing him.

A cottage which stood on a high slope above this townlet and its bay resounded one morning with the notes of a merry company. Ethelberta had managed

to find room for herself and her young relations in the house of one of the boatmen, whose wife attended upon them all, Captain Flower, her husband, assisting her in the dinner preparations, when he slipped about the house as lightly as a girl and spoke of himself as cook's mate. The house was so small that the sailor's rich voice, developed by shouting in high winds during a twenty years' experience in the coasting trade, could be heard coming from the kitchen between the chirpings of the children in the parlour. The furniture of this apartment consisted mostly of the painting of a full-rigged ship, done by a man whom the captain had specially selected for the purpose because he had been seven-and-twenty years at sea before touching a brush, and thereby offered a sufficient guarantee that he understood how to paint a vessel properly.

Before this picture sat Ethelberta in a light linen dress, and with tightly-knotted hair—now again Berta Chickereel as of old—serving out breakfast to the rest of the party, and sometimes lifting her eyes to the outlook from the window, which presented a happy combination of grange scenery with marine. Upon the irregular slope between the house and the quay was an orchard of aged trees wherein every apple ripening on the boughs presented its rubicund side towards the cottage, because that building chanced to lie upwards in the same direction as the sun. Under the trees were a few Cape sheep, and over them the stone

chimneys of the village below : outside these lay the tanned sails of a ketch or smack, and the violet waters of the bay, seamed and creased by breezes insufficient to raise waves ; beyond all a curved wall of cliff, terminating in a promontory, which was flanked by tall and shining obelisks of chalk rising sheer from the trembling blue race beneath.

Sitting in the room that commanded this prospect, a white butterfly among the apple-trees might be mistaken for the sails of a yacht far away on the sea ; and in the evening, when the light was dim, what seemed like a fly crawling upon the window-pane would turn out to be a boat in the bay.

When breakfast was over, Ethelberta sat leaning on the window-sill considering her movements for the day. It was the time fixed for the meeting of the Imperial Association at Coomb Castle, the celebrated ruin five miles off, and the meeting had some fascinations for her. For one thing, she had never been present at a gathering of the kind, although what was left in any shape from the past was her constant interest, because it recalled her to herself and fortified her mind. Persons waging a harassing social fight are apt in the interest of the combat to forget the smallness of the end in view ; and the hints that perishing historical remnants afforded her of the attenuating effects of time even upon great struggles corrected the apparent scale of her own. She was reminded that in a strife for such

a ludicrously small object as the entry of drawing-rooms, winning, equally with losing, is below the zero of the true philosopher's concern.

There could never be a more excellent reason than this for going to view the meagre stumps remaining from flourishing bygone centuries, and it had weight with Ethelberta this very day ; but it would be difficult to state the whole composition of her motive. The approaching meeting had been one of the great themes at Mr. Doncastle's dinner-party, and Lord Mountclere, on learning that she was to be at Knollsea, had recommended her attendance at some, if not all of the meetings, as a desirable and exhilarating change after her laborious season's work in town. It was pleasant to have won her way so far in high places that her health of body and mind should be thus considered—pleasant, less as personal gratification, than that it casually reflected a proof of her good judgment in a course which everybody among her kindred had condemned by calling a fool-hardy undertaking.

And she might go without the restraint of ceremony. Unconventionality—almost eccentricity—was *de rigueur* for one who had been first heard of as a poetess ; from whose red lips magic romance had since trilled for weeks to crowds of listeners, as from a perennial spring.

So Ethelberta went, after a considerable pondering how to get there without the needless sacrifice either of dignity or cash. It would be inconsiderate to the

children to spend a pound on a brougham when as much as she could spare was wanted for their holiday. It was almost too far to walk. She had, however, decided to walk, when she met a boy with a donkey, who offered to lend it to her for three shillings. The animal was rather sad-looking, but Ethelberta found she could sit upon the pad without discomfort. Considering that she might pull up some distance short of the castle, and leave the ass at a cottage before joining her four-wheeled friends, she struck the bargain and rode on her way.

This was, first by a path on the shore where the tide dragged huskily up and down the shingle without disturbing it, and thence up the steep crest of land opposite, whereon she lingered awhile to let the ass breathe. On one of the spires of chalk into which the hill here had been split was perched a cormorant, silent and motionless, with wings spread out to dry in the sun after his morning's fishing, their wet surface shining like mail. Retiring without disturbing him and turning to the left along the lofty ridge which ran inland, the country on each side lay beneath her like a map, domains behind domains, parishes by the score, harbours, fir-woods, and little inland seas mixing curiously together. Thence she ambled along through a huge cemetery of barrows, containing human dust from pre-historic times.

Standing on the top of a giant's grave in this

antique land, Ethelberta lifted her eyes to behold two sorts of weather pervading Nature at the same time. Far below on the right hand it was a fine day, and the silver sunbeams lighted up a many-armed inland sea which stretched round an island with fir-trees and gorse, and amid brilliant crimson heaths wherein white paths and roads occasionally met the eye in dashes and zigzags like flashes of lightning. Outside, where the broad Channel appeared, a berylline and opalized variegation of ripples, currents, deeps, and shallows, lay as fair under the sun as a New Jerusalem, the shores being of gleaming sand. Upon the radiant heather bees and butterflies were busy, she knew, and the birds on that side were just beginning their autumn songs.

On the left, quite up to her position, was dark and cloudy weather, shading a valley of heavy greens and browns, which at its further side rose to meet the sea in tall cliffs, suggesting even here at their back how terrible were their aspects seaward in a growling south-west gale. Here grassed hills rose like knuckles gloved in dark olive, and little plantations between them formed a still deeper and sadder monochrome. A zinc sky met a leaden sea on this hand, the low wind groaned and whined, and not a bird sang.

The ridge along which Ethelberta rode divided these two climates like a wall; it soon became apparent that they were wrestling for mastery immediately in her pathway. The issue long remained doubtful, and

this being an imaginative hour with her, she watched as typical of her own fortunes how the front of battle swayed—now to the west, flooding her with sun, now to the east, covering her with shade: then the wind moved round to the north, a blue hole appeared in the overhanging cloud, at about the place of the north star; and the sunlight spread on both sides of her.

The towers of the notable ruin to be visited rose out of the furthest shoulder of the upland as she advanced, its site being the slope and crest of a smoothly nibbled mount at the toe of the ridge she had followed. When observing the previous uncertainty of the weather on this side, Ethelberta had been led to doubt if the meeting would be held here to-day, and she was now strengthened in her opinion that it would not by the total absence of human figures amid the ruins, though the time of appointment was past. This disposed of another question which had perplexed her: where to find a stable for the ass during the meeting, for she had scarcely liked the idea of facing the whole body of lords and gentlemen upon the animal's back. She now decided to retain her seat, ride round the ruin, and go home again, without troubling further about the movements of the Association or acquaintance with the members composing it.

Accordingly Ethelberta crossed the bridge over the moat, and rode under the first archway into the outer ward. As she had expected, not a soul was here. The

arrow-slits, portcullis-grooves, and staircases met her eye as familiar friends, for in her childhood she had once paid a visit to the spot. Ascending the green incline and through another arch into the second ward, she still pressed on, till at last the ass was unable to clamber an inch further. Here she dismounted, and tying him to a stone which projected like an eye-tooth from a raw edge of wall, performed the remainder of the ascent on foot. Once among the towers above, she became so interested in the windy corridors, mildewed dungeons, and the tribe of daws peering invidiously upon her from overhead, that she forgot the flight of time.

Nearly three-quarters of an hour passed before she came out from the immense walls, and looked from an opening to the front over the wide expanse of the outer ward, by which she had ascended.

Ethelberta was taken aback to see there a cloud of drapery of many colours, blue, buff, pied, and black, that had burst from a file of shining carriages during her seclusion in the keep, and was creeping up the incline. It parted into fragments, dived into old doorways, and lost substance behind projecting piles. Recognising in this the ladies and gentlemen of the meeting, her first thought was how to escape, for she was suddenly overcome with dread to meet them all single-handed as she stood. She drew back and hurried round to the side, as the laughter and voices

of the assembly began to be audible, and, more than ever vexed that she could not have fallen in with them in some unobtrusive way, Ethelberta found that they were immediately beneath her.

Venturing to peep forward again, what was her mortification at finding them gathered in a ring, round no object of interest belonging to the ruin, but round her faithful beast, who had loosened himself in some way from the stone, and stood in the middle of a plat of grass, placidly regarding them.

Being now in the teeth of the Association, there was nothing to do but to go on, since, if she did not, the next few steps of their advance would disclose her. She made the best of it, and began to descend in the broad view of the assembly, from the midst of which proceeded a laugh—‘Hee-hee-hee!’ Ethelberta knew that Lord Mountclere was there.

‘The poor thing has strayed from its owner,’ said one lady, as they all stood looking at the phenomenal ass.

‘It may belong to some of the villagers,’ said the President, in a historical voice: ‘and it may be appropriate to mention that many were kept here in olden times: they were largely used as beasts of burden in victualling the castle previous to the last siege, in the year sixteen hundred and forty-five.’

‘It is very weary, and has come a long way, I think’ said a lady; adding, in an imaginative tone,

‘the humble creature looks so aged and is so quaintly saddled that we may suppose it to be only an animated relic of the same date as the other remains.’

By this time Lord Mountclere had noticed Ethelberta’s presence, and straightening himself to ten years younger, he lifted his hat in answer to her smile, and came up jauntily. It was a good time now to see what the viscount was really like. He appeared to be about sixty-five, and the dignified aspect which he wore to a gazer at a distance became depreciated to jocund slyness upon nearer view, when the small type could be read between the leading lines. Then it could be seen that his upper lip dropped to a point in the middle, as if impressing silence upon his too demonstrative lower one. His right and left profiles were different, one corner of his mouth being more compressed than the other, producing a deep line thence downwards to the side of his chin. Each eyebrow rose obliquely outwards and upwards, and was thus far above the little eye, shining with the clearness of a pond that has just been able to weather the heats of summer. Below this was a preternaturally fat jowl, which, by thrusting against cheeks and chin, caused the arch old mouth to be almost buried at the corners.

A few words of greeting passed, and Ethelberta told him how she was fearing to meet them all, united and primed with their morning’s knowledge as they appeared to be.

‘Well, we have not done much yet,’ said Lord Mountclere. ‘As for myself, I have given no thought at all to our day’s work. I had not forgotten your promise to attend, if you could possibly drive across, and—hee-hee-hee!—I have frequently looked towards the hill where the road descends. . . . Will you now permit me to introduce some of my party—as many of them as you care to know by name? I think they would all like to speak to you.’

Ethelberta then found herself nominally made known to ten or a dozen ladies and gentlemen who had wished for special acquaintance with her. She stood there, as all women stand who have made themselves remarkable by their originality, or devotion to any singular cause, as a person freed of her hampering and inconvenient sex, and, by virtue of her popularity, unfettered from the conventionalities of manner prescribed by custom for household womankind. The charter to move abroad unchaperoned, which society for good reasons grants only to women of three sorts—the famous, the ministering, and the improper—Ethelberta was in a fair way to make splendid use of: instead of walking in protected lanes she experienced that luxury of isolation which normally is enjoyed by men alone, in conjunction with the attention naturally bestowed on a woman young and fair. Among the presentations were Mr. and Mrs. Tynn, member and member’s mainspring for North Wessex; Sir Cyril and Lady

Blandsbury; Lady Jane Joy; and the Honourable Edgar Mountclere, the viscount's brother. There also hovered near her the learned Doctor Yore; Mr. Small, a talented writer, who never printed his works; the Reverend Mr. Brook, rector; the Very Reverend Dr. Taylor, dean; and the undoubtedly reverend Mr. Tinkleton, Nonconformist, who had slipped into the fold by chance.

These and others looked with interest at Ethelberta; the old county fathers hard, as at a questionable town phenomenon, the county sons tenderly, as at a pretty creature, and the county daughters with great admiration, as at a lady reported by their mammas to be no better than she should be. It will be seen that Ethelberta was the sort of woman that well-rooted local people might like to look at on such a free and friendly occasion as an archæological meeting, where, to gratify a pleasant whim, the picturesque form of acquaintance is for the nonce preferred to the useful, the spirits being so brisk as to swerve from strict attention to the select and sequent gifts of heaven, blood and acres, to consider for an idle moment the subversive Mephistophelian endowment, brains.

‘Our progress in the survey of the castle has not been far as yet,’ Lord Mountclere resumed; ‘indeed, we have only just arrived, the weather this morning being so unsettled. When you came up we were engaged in a preliminary study of the poor animal you

see there: how it could have got up here we cannot understand.'

He pointed as he spoke to the donkey which had brought Ethelberta thither, whereupon she was silent and gazed at her untoward beast as if she had never before beheld him.

The ass looked at Ethelberta as though he would say, 'Why don't you own me, after safely bringing you over those weary hills?' But the pride and emulation which had made her what she was would not permit her, as the most lovely woman there, to take upon her own shoulders the ridicule that had already been cast upon the ass. Had he been young and gaily caparisoned, she might have done it; but his age, the clumsy trappings of rustic make, and his needy woful look of hard servitude, were too much to endure.

'Many come and picnic here,' she said, serenely, 'and the animal may have been left till they return from some walk.'

'True,' said Lord Mountclere, without the slightest suspicion of the truth. The humble ass hung his head in his usual manner, and it demanded little fancy from Ethelberta to imagine that he despised her. And then her mind flew back to her history and extraction, to her father—perhaps at that moment inventing a private plate-powder in an underground pantry—and with a groan at her inconsistency in being ashamed of the

ass, she said in her heart, 'My God, what a thing am I!'

They then all moved on to another part of the castle, the viscount busying himself round and round her person like the head scraper at a pig-killing; and as they went indiscriminately mingled, jesting lightly or talking in earnest, she beheld ahead of her the form of Neigh among the rest.

Now, there could only be one reason on earth for Neigh's presence—her remark that she might attend—for Neigh took no more interest in antiquities than in the back of the moon. Ethelberta was a little flurried; perhaps he had come to scold her, or to treat her badly in that indefinable way of his by which he could make a woman feel as nothing without any direct act at all. She was afraid of him, and, determining to shun him, was thankful that Lord Mountclere was near, to take off the edge of Neigh's manner towards her if he approached.

'Do you know in what part of the ruins the lecture is to be given?' she said to the viscount.

'Wherever you like,' he replied gallantly. 'Do you propose a place, and I will get Dr. Yore to adopt it. Say, shall it be here, or where they are standing?'

How could Ethelberta refrain from exercising a little power when it was put into her hands in this way?

‘Let it be here,’ she said, ‘if it makes no difference to the meeting.’

‘It shall be,’ said Lord Mountclere.

And then the lively old nobleman skipped like a roe to the President and to Dr. Yore, who was to read the paper on the castle, and they soon appeared coming back to where the viscount’s party and Ethelberta were beginning to seat themselves. The bulk of the company followed, and Dr. Yore began.

He must have had a countenance of leather—as, indeed, from his colour he appeared to have—to stand unmoved in his position, and read, and look up to give explanations, without a change of muscle, under the dozens of bright eyes that were there converged upon him, like the sticks of a fan, from the ladies who sat round him in a semicircle upon the grass. However, he went on calmly, and the women sheltered themselves from the heat with their umbrellas and sunshades, their ears lulled by the hum of insects, and by the drone of the doctor’s voice. The reader buzzed on with the history of the castle, tracing its development from a mound with a few earthworks to its condition in Norman times; he related monkish marvels connected with the spot; its resistance under Matilda to Stephen, its probable shape while a residence of King John, and the sad story of the Damsel of Brittany, sister of his victim Arthur, who was confined here in company with the two daughters of Alexander, king of

Scotland. He went on to recount the confinement of Edward II. herein, previous to his murder at Berkeley, the gay doings in the reign of Elizabeth, and so downward through time to the final overthrow of the stern old pile. As he proceeded, the lecturer pointed with his finger at the various features appertaining to the date of his story, which he told with splendid vigour when he had warmed to his work, till his narrative, particularly in the conjectural and romantic parts, where it became coloured rather by the speaker's imagination than by the pigments of history, gathered together the wandering thoughts of all. It was easy for him then to meet those fair concentrated eyes, when the sunshades were thrown back, and complexions forgotten, in the interest of the history. The doctor's face was then no longer criticised as a rugged boulder, a dried fig, an oak carving, or a walnut shell, but became blotted out like a mountain top in a shining haze by the nebulous pictures conjured by his tale.

Then the lecture ended, and questions were asked, and individuals of the company wandered at will, the light dresses of the ladies sweeping over the hot grass and brushing up thistledown which had hitherto lain quiescent, so that it rose in a flight from the skirts of each like a comet's tail.

Some of Lord Mountclere's party, including himself and Ethelberta, wandered now into a cool dungeon, partly open to the air overhead, where long arms of

ivy hung between their eyes and the white sky. While they were here, Lady Jane Joy and some other friends of the viscount told Ethelberta that they were probably coming on to Knollsea.

She instantly perceived that getting into close quarters in that way might be very inconvenient, considering the youngsters she had under her charge, and straightway decided upon a point that she had debated for several days—a visit to her aunt in Normandy. In London it had been a mere thought, but the Channel had looked so tempting from its brink that the journey was virtually fixed as soon as she reached Knollsea, and found that a little pleasure steamer crossed to Cherbourg once a week during the summer, so that she would not have to enter the crowded routes at all.

‘I am afraid I shall not see you in Knollsea,’ she said. ‘I am about to go to Cherbourg and then to Rouen.’

‘How sorry I am. When do you leave?’

‘At the beginning of next week,’ said Ethelberta, settling the time there and then.

‘Did I hear you say that you were going to Cherbourg and Rouen?’ Lord Mountclere enquired.

‘I think to do so,’ said Ethelberta.

‘I am going to Normandy myself,’ said a voice behind her, and without turning she knew that Neigh was standing there.

They next went outside, and Lord Mountclere offered Ethelberta his arm on the ground of assisting her down the burnished grass slope. Ethelberta, taking pity upon him, gave it; but the assistance was all on her side; she stood like a statue amid his slips and totterings, some of which taxed her strength heavily, and her ingenuity more, to appear as the supported and not the supporter. The incident brought Neigh still further from his retirement, and she learnt that he was one of a yachting party which had put in at Knollsea that morning; she was greatly relieved to find that he was just now on his way to London, whence he would probably proceed on his journey abroad.

Ethelberta adhered as well as she could to her resolve that Neigh should not speak with her alone, but by dint of perseverance he did manage to address her without being overheard.

‘Will you give me an answer?’ said Neigh. ‘I have come on purpose.’

‘I cannot just now. I have been led to doubt you.’

‘Doubt me? What new wrong have I done?’

‘Spoken jestingly of my visit to Harefield.’

‘Good ——! I did not speak or think of you. When I told that incident I had no idea who the lady was—I did not know it was you till two days later, and I at once held my tongue. I vow to you upon my soul

and life that what I say is true. How shall I prove my truth better than by my errand here?’

‘Don’t speak of this now. I am so occupied with other things. I am going to Rouen, and will think of it on my way.’

‘I am going there too. When do you go?’

‘I shall be in Rouen next Wednesday, I hope.’

‘May I ask where?’

‘Hôtel Beau Séjour.’

‘Will you give me an answer there? I can easily call upon you. It is now a month and more since you first led me to hope——’

‘I did not lead you to hope—at any rate clearly.’

‘Indirectly you did. And although I am willing to be as considerate as any man ought to be in giving you time to think over the question, there is a limit to my patience. Any necessary delay I will put up with, but I won’t be trifled with. I hate all nonsense, and can’t stand it.’

‘Indeed. Good morning.’

‘But Mrs. Petherwin—just one word.’

‘I have nothing to say.’

‘I will meet you at Rouen for an answer. I would meet you in Hades for the matter of that. Remember this: next Wednesday, if I live, I shall call upon you at Rouen.’

She did not say nay.

‘May I?’ he added.

‘If you will.’

‘But say it shall be an appointment?’

‘Very well.’

Lord Mountclere was by this time toddling towards them to ask if they would come on to his house, Lychworth Court, not very far distant, to lunch with the rest of the party. Neigh, having already arranged to go on to town that afternoon, was obliged to decline, and Ethelberta thought fit to do the same, idly asking Lord Mountclere if Lychworth Court lay in the direction of a gorge that was visible where they stood.

‘No; considerably to the left,’ he said. ‘The opening you are looking at would reveal the sea if it were not for the trees that block the way. Ah, those trees have a history; they are half a dozen elms which I planted myself when I was a boy. How time flies!’

‘It is unfortunate they stand just so as to cover the blue bit of sea. That addition would double the value of the view from here.’

‘You would prefer the blue sea to the trees?’

‘In that particular spot I should; they might have looked just as well, and yet have hidden nothing worth seeing. The narrow slit would have been invaluable there.’

‘They shall fall before the sun sets, in deference to your opinion,’ said Lord Mountclere.

‘That would be rash indeed,’ said Ethelberta,

laughing, 'when my opinion on such a point may be worth nothing whatever.'

'Where no other is acted upon, it is practically the universal one,' he replied gaily.

And then Ethelberta's elderly admirer bade her adieu, and away the whole party drove in a long train over the hills towards the valleys wherein stood Lychworth Court. Ethelberta's carriage was supposed by her friends to have been left at the village inn, as were many others, and her retiring from view on foot attracted no notice.

She watched them out of sight, and she also saw the rest depart—those who, their interest in archæology having begun and ended with this spot, had, like herself, declined the hospitable viscount's invitation, and started to drive or walk at once home again. Thereupon the castle was quite deserted except by Ethelberta, the ass, and the jackdaws, now floundering at ease again in and about the ivy of the keep.

Not wishing to enter Knollsea till the evening shades were falling, she still walked amid the ruins, examining more leisurely some points which the stress of keeping herself companionable would not allow her to attend to while the assemblage was present. At the end of the survey, being somewhat weary with her clambering, she sat down on the slope commanding the gorge where the trees grew, to make a pencil sketch of the landscape as it was revealed between the ragged walls.

Thus engaged she weighed the circumstances of Lord Mountclere's invitation, and could not be certain if it were prudishness or simple propriety in herself which had instigated her to refuse. She would have liked the visit for many reasons, and if Lord Mountclere had been anybody but a remarkably attentive old widower, she would have gone. As it was, it had occurred to her that there was something in his tone which should lead her to hesitate. Was anyone among the elderly or married ladies who had appeared upon the ground in a detached form as she had done—and many had appeared thus—invited to Lychworth; and if not, why were they not? That Lord Mountclere admired her there was no doubt, and for this reason it behoved her to be careful. His disappointment at parting from her was, in one aspect, simply laughable, from its odd resemblance to the unfeigned sorrow of a boy of fifteen at a first parting from his first love; in another aspect it caused reflection; and she thought again of his curiosity about her doings for the remainder of the summer.

While she sketched and thought thus, the shadows grew longer, and the sun low. And then she perceived a movement in the gorge. One of the trees forming the curtain across it began to wave strangely: it went further to one side, and fell. Where the tree had stood was now a rent in the foliage, and through the narrow rent could be seen the distant sea.

Ethelberta uttered a soft exclamation. It was not caused by the surprise she had felt, nor by the intrinsic interest of the sight, nor by want of comprehension. It was a sudden realisation of vague things hitherto dreamed of from a distance only—a sense of novel power put into her hands without request or expectation. A landscape was to be altered to suit her whim. She had in her lifetime moved essentially larger mountains, but they had seemed of far less splendid material than this ; for it was the nature of the gratification rather than its magnitude which enchanted the fancy of a woman whose poetry, in spite of her necessities, was hardly yet extinguished. But there was something more, with which poetry had little to do. Whether the opinion of any pretty woman in England was of more weight with Lord Mountclere than memories of his boyhood, or whether that distinction was reserved for her alone ; this was a point that she would have liked to know.

The enjoyment of power in a new element, an enjoyment somewhat resembling in kind that which is given by a first ride or swim, held Ethelberta to the spot, and she waited but sketched no more. Another tree-top swayed and vanished as before, and the slit of sea was larger still. Her mind and eye were so occupied with this matter that sitting in her nook she did not observe a thin young man, his boots white with the dust of a long journey on foot, who arrived at the castle

by the valley-road from Knollsea. He looked awhile at the ruin, and, skirting its flank instead of entering by the great gateway, climbed up the scarp and walked in through a breach. After standing for a moment among the walls, now silent and apparently empty, with a disappointed look he descended the slope, and proceeded along on his way.

Ethelberta, who was in quite another part of the castle, saw the black spot diminishing to the size of a fly as he receded along the dusty road, and soon after she descended on the other side, where she remounted the ass, and ambled homeward as she had come, in no bright mood. What, seeing the precariousness of her state, was the day's triumph worth after all, unless, before her beauty abated, she could ensure her position against the attacks of chance?

To be thus is nothing ;
But to be safely thus ;

—she said it more than once on her journey that day.

On entering the sitting-room of their cot up the hill she found it empty, and from a change perceptible in the position of small articles of furniture, something unusual seemed to have taken place in her absence. The dwelling being of that sort in which whatever goes on in one room is audible through all the rest, Picotee, who was upstairs, heard the arrival and came down.

Picotee's face was rosed over with the brilliance of some excitement. 'What do you think I have to tell you, Berta?' she said.

'I have no idea,' said her sister. 'Surely,' she added, her face intensifying to a wan sadness, 'Mr. Julian has not been here?'

'Yes,' said Picotee. 'And we went down to the sands—he, and Myrtle, and Georgina, and Emmeline, and I—and Cornelia came down when she had put away the dinner. And then we dug wriggles out of the sand with Myrtle's spade: we got such a lot, and had such fun; they are in a dish in the kitchen. Mr. Julian came to see you; but at last he could wait no longer, and when I told him you were at the meeting in the castle ruins he said he would try to find you there on his way home, if he could get there before the meeting broke up.'

'Then it was he I saw far away on the road—yes, it must have been.' She remained in gloomy reverie a few moments, and then said, 'Very well—let it be. Picotee, get me some tea: I do not want dinner.'

But the news of Christopher's visit seemed to have taken away her appetite for tea also, and after sitting a little while she flung herself down upon the couch, and told Picotee that she had settled to go and see their aunt Charlotte.

'I am going to write to Sol and Dan to ask them to meet me there,' she added. 'I want them, if possible,

to see Paris. It will improve them greatly in their trades, I am thinking, if they can see the kinds of joinery and decoration practised in France. They agreed to go, if I should wish it, before we left London. You, of course, will go as my maid.'

Picotee gazed upon the sea with a crestfallen look, as if she would rather not cross it in any capacity just then.

'It would scarcely be worth going to the expense of taking me, would it?' she said.

The cause of Picotee's sudden sense of economy was so plain that her sister smiled; but young love, however foolish, is to a thinking person far too tragic a power for ridicule; and Ethelberta forbore, going on as if Picotee had not spoken: 'I must have you with me. I may be seen there: so many are passing through Rouen at this time of the year. Cornelia can take excellent care of the children while we are gone. I want to get out of England, and I will get out of England. There is nothing but vanity and vexation here.'

'I am sorry you were away when he called,' said Picotee, gently.

'Oh, I don't mean that. I wish there were no different ranks in the world, and that contrivance were not a necessary faculty to have at all. Well, we are going to cross by the little steamer that puts in here, and we are going on Monday.' She added in another

minute, 'What had Mr. Julian to tell us that he came here? How did he find us out?'

'I mentioned that we were coming here in my letter to Faith. Mr. Julian says that perhaps he and his sister may also come for a few days before the season is over. I should like to see Miss Julian again. She is such a nice girl.'

'Yes.' Ethelberta played with her hair, and looked at the ceiling as she reclined. 'I have decided after all,' she said, 'that it will be better to take Cornelia as my maid, and leave you here with the children. Cornelia is stronger as a companion than you, and she will be delighted to go. Do you think you are competent to keep Myrtle and Georgina out of harm's way?'

'Oh yes—I will be exceedingly careful,' said Picotee, with great vivacity. 'And if there is time I can go on teaching them a little.' Then Picotee caught Ethelberta's eye, and colouring red, sank down beside her sister, whispering, 'I know why it is. But if you would rather have me with you I will go, and not once wish to stay.'

Ethelberta looked as if she knew all about that, and said, 'Of course there will be no necessity to tell the Julians about my departure until they have fixed the time for coming, and cannot alter their minds.'

The sound of the children with Cornelia, and their appearance outside the window, pushing between the

fuchsia bushes which overhung the path, put an end to this dialogue ; they entered armed with buckets and spades, a very moist and sandy aspect pervading them as far up as the high-water mark of their clothing, and began to tell Ethelberta of the wonders of the deep.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A ROOM IN LYCHWORTH COURT.

‘ARE you sure the report is true?’

‘I am sure that what I say is true, my lord ; but it is hardly to be called a report. It is a secret, known at present to nobody but myself and Mrs. Doncastle’s maid.’

The speaker was Lord Mountclere’s trusty valet, and the conversation was between him and the viscount in a dressing-room at Lychworth Court, on the evening after the meeting of archæologists at Coomb Castle.

‘H’m-h’m : the daughter of a butler. Does Mrs. Doncastle know of this yet, or Mr. Neigh, or any of their friends?’

‘No, my lord.’

‘You are quite positive?’

‘Quite positive. I was, by accident, the first that Mrs. Menlove named the matter to, and I told her it might be much to her advantage if she took particular care it should go no further.’

‘Mrs. Menlove? Who’s she?’

‘The lady’s maid at Mrs. Doncastle’s, my lord.’

‘Oh, ah—of course. You may leave me now, Tipman.’ Lord Mountclere remained in thought for a moment. ‘A clever little puss, to hoodwink us all like this—hee-hee!’—he murmured. ‘Her education—how finished; and her beauty—so seldom that I meet with such a woman. Cut down my elms to please a butler’s daughter—what a joke—certainly a good joke! To interest me in her on the right side instead of the wrong was strange. But it can be made to change sides—hee-hee!—it can be made to change sides! Tipman!’

Tipman came forward from the doorway.

‘Will you take care that that piece of gossip you mentioned to me is not repeated in this house? I strongly disapprove of talebearing of any sort, and wish to hear no more of this. Such stories are never true. Answer me—do you hear? Such stories are never true.’

‘I beg pardon, but I think your lordship will find this one true,’ said the valet, quietly.

‘Then where did she get her manners and education? Do you know?’

‘I do not, my lord. I suppose she picked ’em up by her wits.’

‘Never mind what you suppose,’ said the old man, impatiently. ‘Whenever I ask a question of you tell me what you know, and no more.’

‘Quite so, my lord. I beg your lordship’s pardon for supposing.’

‘H’m-h’m. Have the fashion-books and plates arrived yet?’

‘*Le Follet* has, my lord; but not the others.’

‘Let me have it at once. Always bring it to me at once. Are there any handsome ones this time?’

‘They are much the same class of female as usual I think, my lord,’ said Tipman, fetching the paper and laying it before him.

‘Yes, they are,’ said the viscount, leaning back and scrutinising the faces of the women one by one, and talking softly to himself in a way that had grown upon him as his age increased. ‘Yet they are very well: that one with her shoulder turned is pure and charming—the brown-haired one will pass. All very harmless and innocent, but without character: no soul, or inspiration, or eloquence of eye. What an eye was hers! There is not a girl among them so beautiful. . . . Tipman! Come and take it away. I don’t think I will subscribe to these papers any longer—how long have I subscribed? Never mind—I take no interest in these things, and I suppose I must give them up. What white article is that I see on the floor yonder?’

‘I can see nothing, my lord.’

‘Yes, yes, you can. At the other end of the room. It is a white handkerchief. Bring it to me.’

‘I beg pardon, my lord, but I cannot see any white handkerchief. Whereabouts does your lordship mean?’

‘There, in the corner. If it is not a handkerchief, what is it? Walk along till you come to it—that is it; now a little further—now your foot is against it.’

‘Oh that—it is not anything. It is the light reflected against the skirting, so that it looks like a white patch of something—that is all.’

‘H’m-h’m. My eyes—how weak they are! I am getting old, that’s what it is: I am an old man.’

‘Oh no, my lord.’

‘Yes, an old man.’

‘Well, we shall all be old some day, and so will your lordship, I suppose; but as yet——’

‘I tell you I am an old man!’

‘Yes, my lord—I did not mean to contradict. An old man in one sense—old in a young man’s sense, but not in a house-of-parliament or historical sense. A little oldish—I meant that, my lord.’

‘I may be an old man in one sense or in another sense in your mind; but let me tell you there are men older than I.’

‘Yes, so there are, my lord.’

‘People may call me what they please, and you may be impertinent enough to repeat to me what they say, but let me tell you I am not a very old man after all. I am not an old man!’

‘Old in knowledge of the world I meant, my lord, not in years.’

‘Well, yes. Experience of course I cannot be without. And as an artist I appreciate what is beautiful. Tipman, you must go to Knollsea; don’t send, but go yourself, as I wish nobody else to be concerned in this. Go to Knollsea, and find out when the steamboat for Cherbourg starts; and when you have done that, I shall want you to send Taylor to me. I wish Captain Strong to bring the “Fawn” round into Knollsea Bay. Next week I may want you to go to Cherbourg in the yacht with me—if the Channel is pretty calm—and then perhaps to Rouen and Paris. But I will speak of that to-morrow.’

‘Very good, my lord’

‘Meanwhile I recommend that you and Mrs. Menlove repeat nothing you may have heard concerning the lady you just now spoke of. Here is a slight present for Mrs. Menlove; and accept this for yourself.’ He handed money.

‘Your lordship may be sure we will not,’ the valet replied.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE ENGLISH CHANNEL—NORMANDY.

ON Monday morning the little steamer 'Speedwell' made her appearance round the promontory by Knollsea Bay, to take in passengers for the transit to Cherbourg. Breezes the freshest that could blow without verging on keenness flew over the quivering deeps and shallows; and the sunbeams pierced every detail of barrow, path, and rabbit-run upon the lofty convexity of down and waste which shut in Knollsea from the world to the west.

They left the pier at eight o'clock, taking at first a short easterly course to avoid a sinister ledge of limestones jutting from the water like crocodile's teeth, which first obtained notoriety in English history through being the spot whereon a formidable Danish fleet went to pieces a thousand years ago. At the moment that the 'Speedwell' turned to enter upon the direct course, a schooner-yacht, whose sheets gleamed like bridal satin, loosed from a remoter part of the bay: continuing to bear off, she cut across the steamer's wake, and took a course almost due

southerly, which was precisely that of the 'Speedwell.' The wind was very favourable for the yacht, blowing a few points from north in a steady pressure on her quarter, and having been built with every modern appliance that shipwrights could offer, the schooner found no difficulty in getting abreast, and even ahead, of the steamer, as soon as she had escaped the shelter of the hills.

The more or less parallel courses of the vessels continued for some time without causing any remark among the people on board the 'Speedwell.' At length one noticed the fact, and another; and then it became the general topic of conversation in the group upon the bridge, where Ethelberta, her hair getting frizzed and her cheeks carnationed by the wind, sat upon a camp-stool looking towards the prow.

'She is bound for Guernsey,' said one. 'In half an hour she will put about for a more westerly course, you'll see.'

'She is not for Guernsey or anywhere that way,' said an acquaintance, looking through his glass. 'If she is out for anything more than a morning cruise, she is bound for our port. I should not wonder if she is crossing to get stocked, as most of them do, to save the duty on her provisions.'

'Do you know whose yacht it is?'

'I do not.'

Ethelberta looked at the light leaning figure of

the pretty schooner, which seemed to skate along upon her bilge and make white shavings of all the sea that touched her. She at first imagined that this might be the yacht Neigh had arrived in at the end of the previous week, for she knew that he came as one of a yachting party, and she had noticed no other boat of that sort in the bay since his arrival. But as all his party had gone ashore and not yet returned, she was surprised to see the supposed vessel here. To add to her perplexity, she could not be positive, now that it came to a real nautical query, whether the craft of Neigh's friends had one mast or two, for she had caught but a fragmentary view of the topsail over the apple-trees.

'Is that the yacht which has been lying at Knollsea for the last few days?' she enquired of the master of the 'Speedwell,' as soon as she had an opportunity.

The master warmed beneath his copper-coloured rind. 'O no, miss; that one you saw was a cutter—a smaller boat altogether,' he replied. 'Built on the sliding-keel principle, you understand, miss—and red below her water-line, if you noticed. This is Lord Mountclere's yacht—the "Fawn." You might have seen her re'ching in round Saint Lucas' Leap this morning afore we started.'

'Lord Mountclere's?'

'Yes—a nobleman of this neighbourhood. But he don't do so much at yachting as he used to in his

younger days. I believe he's aboard this morning, however.'

Ethelberta now became more absorbed than ever in their ocean comrade, and watched its motions continually. The schooner was considerably in advance of them by this time, and seemed to be getting by degrees out of their course. She wondered if Lord Mountclere could be really going to Cherbourg: if so, why had he said nothing about the trip to her when she spoke of her own approaching voyage thither? The yacht changed its character in her eyes; losing the indefinite interest of the unknown, it acquired the charm of a riddle on motives, of which the alternatives were, had Lord Mountclere's journey anything to do with her own, or had it not? Common probability pointed to the latter supposition; but the time of starting, the course of the yacht, and recollections of Lord Mountclere's homage, suggested the more extraordinary possibility.

She went across to Cornelia. 'The man who handed us on board—didn't I see him speaking to you this morning?' she said.

'O yes,' said Cornelia. 'He asked if my mistress was the popular Mrs. Petherwin?'

'And you told him, I suppose?'

'Yes.'

'What made you do that, Cornelia?'

‘I thought I might : I couldn’t help it. When I went through the toll-gate, such a gentlemanly-looking man asked me if he should help me to carry the things to the end of the pier ; and as we went on together he said he supposed me to be Mrs. Petherwin’s maid. I said, “ Yes.” The two men met afterwards, so there would ha’ been no good in my denying it to one of ’em.’

‘ Who was this gentlemanly person ? ’

‘ I asked the other man that, and he told me one of Lord Mountclere’s upper servants. I knew then there was no harm in having been civil to him. He is well-mannered, and talks splendid language.’

‘ That yacht you see on our right hand is Lord Mountclere’s property. If I do not mistake, we shall have her closer by-and-by, and you may meet your gentlemanly friend again. Be careful how you talk to him.’

Ethelberta sat down, thought of the meeting at Coomb Castle, of the dinner-party at Mr. Doncastle’s, of the strange position she had there been in, and then of her father. She suddenly reproached herself for thoughtlessness ; for in her pocket lay a letter from him, which she had taken from the postman that morning at the moment of coming from the door, and in the hurry of embarking had forgotten ever since. Opening it quickly, she read :—

‘My dear Ethelberta,—Your letter reached me yesterday, and I called round at Connaught Crescent in the afternoon, as you wished. Everything is going on right there, and you have no occasion to be anxious about them. I do not leave town for another week or two, and by the time I am gone Sol and Dan will have returned from Paris, if your mother and Gwendoline want any help: so that you need not hurry back on their account.

‘I have something else to tell you, which is not quite so satisfactory, and it is this that makes me write at once; but do not be alarmed. It began in this way. A few nights after the dinner-party here I was determined to find out if there was any truth in what you had been told about that boy, and having seen Menlove go out as usual after dark, I followed her. Sure enough, when she had got into the park, up came master Joe, smoking a cigar. As soon as they had met I went towards them, and Menlove, seeing somebody draw nigh, began to edge off, when the block-head said, “Never mind, my love; it is only the old man.” Being very provoked with both of them, though she was really the most to blame, I gave him some smart cuts across the shoulders with my cane, and told him to go home, which he did with the flea in his ear, a rascal. I believe I have cured his courting tricks for some little time.

‘ Well, Menlove then walked by me, quite cool, as if she were merely a lady passing by chance at the time, which provoked me still more, knowing the whole truth of it, and I could not help turning upon her and saying, “ You, madam, ought to be served the same way.” She replied in very haughty words, and I walked away, saying that I had something better to do than argue with a woman of her character at that hour of the evening. This so set her up that she followed me home, marched into my pantry, and told me that if I had been more careful about my manners in calling her a bad character, it might have been better both for me and my stuck-up daughter—a daw in eagle’s plumes—and so on. Now it seems that she must have coaxed something out of Joey about you—for what lad in the world could be a match for a woman of her experience and arts! I hope she will do you no serious damage; but I tell you the whole state of affairs exactly as they are, that you may form your own opinions. After all, there is no real disgrace, for none of us have ever done wrong, but have worked honestly for a living. However, I will let you know if anything serious really happens.’

This was all that her father said on the matter, the letter concluding with messages to the children and directions from their mother with regard to their clothes.

Ethelberta felt very distinctly that she was in a strait ; the old impression that, unless her position were secured soon, it never would be secured, returned with great force. A doubt whether it was worth securing would have been very strong ere this, had not others besides herself been concerned in her fortunes. She looked up from her letter, and beheld the pertinacious yacht ; it led her up to a conviction that therein lay a means and an opportunity.

Nothing further of importance occurred in crossing. Ethelberta's head ached after a while, and Cornelia's healthy cheeks of red were found to have diminished their colour to the size of a wafer and the quality of a stain. The 'Speedwell' entered the breakwater at Cherbourg to find the schooner already in the roadstead ; and by the time the steamer was brought up Ethelberta could see the men on board the yacht clewing up and making things snug in a way from which she inferred that they were not going to leave the harbour again that day. With the aspect of a fair galleon that could easily out-manceuvre her persevering buccaneer, Ethelberta passed alongside. Could it be possible that Lord Mountclere had on her account fixed this day for his visit across the Channel ?

'Well, I would rather be haunted by him than by Mr. Neigh,' she said ; and began laying her plans so as to guard against inconvenient surprises.

The next morning Ethelberta was at the railway

station, taking tickets for herself and Cornelia, when she saw an old yet sly and somewhat merry-faced Englishman a little way off. He was attended by a younger man, who appeared to be his valet.

‘I will exchange one of these tickets,’ she said to the clerk, and having done so she went to Cornelia to inform her that it would after all be advisable for them to travel separate, adding, ‘Lord Mountclere is in the station, and I think he is going on by our train. Remember, you are my maid again now. Is not that the gentlemanly man who assisted you yesterday?’ She signified the valet as she spoke.

‘It is,’ said Cornelia.

When the passengers were taking their seats, and Ethelberta was thinking whether she might not after all enter a second-class with Cornelia instead of sitting solitary in a first because of an old man’s proximity, she heard a shuffling at her elbow and the next moment found that he was overtly observing her as if he had not done so in secret at all. She at once gave him an unsurprised gesture of recognition. ‘I saw you some time ago ; what a singular coincidence,’ she said.

‘A charming one,’ said Lord Mountclere, smiling a half-minute smile, and making as if he would take his hat off and would not quite. ‘Perhaps we must not call it coincidence entirely,’ he continued ; ‘my journey, which I have contemplated for some time, was not fixed

this week altogether without a thought of your presence on the road—hee-hee! Do you go far to-day?’

‘As far as Caen,’ said Ethelberta.

‘Ah! That’s the end of my day’s journey, too,’ said Lord Mountclere. They parted and took their respective places, Lord Mountclere choosing a compartment next to the one Ethelberta was entering, and not, as she had expected, attempting to join her.

Now she had instantly fancied when the viscount was speaking that there were signs of some departure from his former respectful manner towards her; and an enigma lay in that. At their earlier meetings he had never ventured upon a distinct coupling of himself and herself as he had done in his broad compliment to-day—if compliment it could be called. She was not sure that he did not exceed his license in telling her deliberately that he had meant to hover near her in a private journey which she was taking without reference to him. She did not object to the act, but to the avowal of the act; and, being as sensitive as a barometer on signs affecting her social condition, it darted upon Ethelberta for one little moment that he might possibly have heard a word or two about her being nothing more nor less than one of a tribe of thralls; hence his freedom of manner. Certainly a plain remark of that sort was exactly what a susceptible peer might be supposed to say to a pretty woman of far inferior degree. A rapid redness filled her face at the

thought that he might have smiled upon her as upon a domestic whom he was disposed to chuck under the chin. 'But no,' she said. 'He would never have taken the trouble to follow and meet with me had he learnt to think me other than a lady. It is extremity of devotion—that's all.'

It was not Ethelberta's inexperience, but that her conception of self precluded such an association of ideas, which led her to dismiss the surmise that his attendance could be inspired by a motive beyond that of paying her legitimate attentions as a co-ordinate with him and his in the social field. Even if he only meant flirtation, she read it as of that sort from which courtship with an eye to matrimony differs only in degree. Hence, she thought, his interest in her was not likely, under the ordinary influences of caste feeling, to continue longer than while he was kept in ignorance of her consanguinity with a stock proscribed. She sighed at the anticipated close of her full-feathered towering when her ties and bonds should be uncovered. She might have seen matters in a different light, and sighed more. But in the stir of the moment it escaped her thought that ignorance of her position, and a consequent regard for her as a woman of good standing, would have prevented his indulgence in any course which was even open to the construction of being disrespectful.

Valognes, Carentan, Isigny, Bayeux, were passed,

and the train drew up at Caen. Ethelberta's intention had been to stay here for one night, but having learnt from Lord Mountclere, as previously described, that this was his destination, she decided to go on. On turning towards the carriage after a few minutes of promenading at the Caen station, she was surprised to perceive that Lord Mountclere, who had alighted as if to leave, was still there.

They spoke again to each other. 'I find I have to go further,' he suddenly said when she had chatted with him a little time. And beckoning to the man who was attending to his baggage, he directed the things to be again placed in the train.

Time passed, and they changed at the next junction. When Ethelberta entered a carriage on the branch line to take her seat for the remainder of the journey, there sat the viscount in the same division. He explained that he was going to Rouen.

Ethelberta came to a quick resolution. Her audacity, like that of a child getting nearer and nearer a parent's side, became wonderfully vigorous as she approached her destination; and though there were three good hours of travel to Rouen as yet, the heavier part of the journey was past. At her aunt's would be a safe refuge, play what pranks she might, and there she would to-morrow meet those bravest of defenders Sol and Dan, to whom she had sent as much money as she could conveniently spare towards their expenses, with

directions that they were to come by the most economical route, and meet her at the house of her aunt, Madame Moulin, previous to their educational trip to Paris, their own contribution being the value of the week's work they would have to lose. Thus backed up by Sol and Dan, her aunt, and Cornelia, Ethelberta felt quite the reverse of a lonely female persecuted by a wicked lord in a foreign country. 'He shall pay for his weaknesses, whatever they mean,' she thought; 'and what they mean I will find out at once.'

'I am going to Paris,' she said.

'You cannot to-night, I think.'

'To-morrow, I mean.'

'I should like to go on to-morrow. Perhaps I may. So that there is a chance of our meeting again.'

'Yes; but I do not leave Rouen till the afternoon. I first shall go to the cathedral, and drive round the city.'

Lord Mountclere smiled pleasantly. There seemed a sort of encouragement in her words. Ethelberta's thoughts, however, had flown at that moment to the approaching situation at her aunt's hotel: it would be extremely embarrassing if he should go there.

'Where do you stay, Lord Mountclere?' she said.

Thus directly asked, he could not but commit himself to the name of the hotel he had been accustomed to patronise, which was one in the upper part of the city.

‘ Mine is not that one,’ said Ethelberta frigidly.

No further remark was made under this head, and they conversed for the remainder of the daylight on scenery and other topics, Lord Mountclere’s air of festivity lending him all the qualities of an agreeable companion. But notwithstanding her resolve, Ethelberta failed, for that day at least, to make her mind clear upon Lord Mountclere’s intentions. To that end she would have liked first to know what were the exact limits set by society to conduct under present conditions, if society had ever set any at all, which was open to question: since experience had long ago taught her that much more freedom actually prevails in the communion of the sexes than is put on paper as etiquette, or admitted in so many words as correct behaviour. In short, everything turned upon whether he had learnt of her position when off the platform at Mayfair Hall.

Wearied with these surmises, and the day’s travel, she closed her eyes. And then her enamoured companion more widely opened his, and traced the beautiful features opposite him. The arch of the brows—like a slur in music—the droop of the lashes, the meeting of the lips, and the sweet rotundity of the chin—one by one, and all together, they were adored, till his heart was like a retort full of spirits of wine.

It was a warm evening, and when they arrived at their journey’s end distant thunder rolled behind heavy

and opaque clouds. Ethelberta bade adieu to her attentive satellite, called to Cornelia, and entered a cab ; but before they reached the inn the thunder had increased. Then a cloud cracked into flame behind the iron spire of the cathedral, showing in relief its black ribs and stanchions, as if they were the bars of a blazing cresset held on high.

‘ Ah, we will clamber up there to-morrow,’ said Ethelberta.

A wondrous stillness pervaded the streets of the city after this, though it was not late ; and their arrival at M. Moulin’s door was quite an event for the quay. No rain came, as they had expected, and by the time they halted the western sky had cleared, so that the newly-lit lamps on the quay, and the evening glow shining over the river, inwove their harmonious rays as the warp and woof of one lustrous tissue. Before they had alighted there appeared from the archway Madame Moulin in person, followed by the servants of the hotel in a manner signifying that they did not receive a visitor once a fortnight, though at that moment the clatter of sixty knives, forks, and tongues was audible through an open window from the adjoining dining-room, to the great interest of a group of idlers outside. Ethelberta had not seen her aunt since she last passed through the town with Lady Petherwin, who then told her that this landlady was the only respectable relative she seemed to have in the world.

Aunt Charlotte's face was an English outline filled in with French shades under the eyes, on the brows, and round the mouth, by the natural effect of years; she resembled the British hostess as little as well could be, no point in her causing the slightest suggestion of drops taken for the stomach's sake. Telling the two young women she would gladly have met them at the station had she known the hour of their arrival, she kissed them both without much apparent notice of a difference in their conditions; indeed, seeming rather to incline to Cornelia, whose country face and homely style of clothing may have been more to her mind than Ethelberta's finished travelling dress, a class of article to which she appeared to be well accustomed. Her husband was at this time at the head of the table-d'hôte, and mentioning the fact as an excuse for his non-appearance, she accompanied them upstairs.

After the strain of keeping up smiles with Lord Mountclere, the rattle and shaking, and the general excitements of the chase across the water and along the rail, a face in which she saw a dim reflex of her mother's was soothing in the extreme, and Ethelberta went up to the staircase with a feeling of expansive thankfulness. Cornelia paused to admire the clean court, and the small caged birds sleeping on their perches, the boxes of veronica in bloom, of oleander, and of tamarisk, which freshened the air of the court and lent a romance to the lamplight, the cooks in their

paper caps and white blouses appearing at odd moments from an avornus behind ; while the prompt ' v'la ! ' of teetotums in mob caps, spinning down the staircase in answer to the periodic clang of bells, filled her with wonder, and pricked her conscience with thoughts of how seldom such transcendent nimbleness was attempted by herself in a part so nearly similar.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE HÔTEL BEAU SÉJOUR, AND SPOTS NEAR IT.

THE next day, much to Ethelberta's surprise, there was a letter for her in her mother's up-hill hand. She neglected all the rest of its contents for the following engrossing sentences:—

‘Menlove has wormed everything out of poor Joey, we find, and your father is much upset about it. She had another quarrel with him, and then declared she would expose you and us to Mrs. Doncastle and all your friends. I think that Menlove is the kind of woman who will stick to her word, and the question for you to consider is, how can you best face out any report of the truth which she will spread, and contradict the lies that she will add to it. It appears to me to be a dreadful thing, and so it will probably appear to you. The worst part will be that your sisters and brothers are your servants, and that your father is actually engaged in the house where you dine. I am dreadful afraid that this will be considered a fine joke for gossips, and will cause no end of laughs in society at your expense. At any rate, should Menlove spread the

report, it would absolutely prevent people from attending your lectures next season, for they would feel like dupes, and be angry with themselves, and you, and all of us.

‘The only way out of the muddle that I can see for you is to put some scheme of marrying into effect as soon as possible, and before these things are known. Surely by this time, with all your opportunities, you have been able to strike up an acquaintance with some gentleman or other, so as to make a suitable match. You see, my dear Berta, marriage is a thing which, once carried out, fixes you more firm in a position than any personal brains can do ; for as you stand at present, every loose tooth, and every combed-out hair, and every new wrinkle, and every sleepless night, is so much took away from your chance for the future, depending as it do upon your skill in charming. I know that you have had some good offers, so do listen to me, and warm up the best man of them again a bit, and get him to repeat his words before your roundness shrinks away, and ’tis too late.

‘Mr. Ladywell has called here to see you ; it was just after I had heard that this Menlove might do harm, so I thought I could do no better than send down word to him that you would much like to see him, and were wondering sadly why he had not called lately. I gave him your address at Rouen, that he might find you, if he chose, at once, and be got to propose, since he is better than nobody. I believe he

said, directly Joey gave him the address, that he was going abroad, and my opinion is that he will come to you, because of the encouragement I gave him. If so, you must thank me for my foresight and care for you.

‘I heave a sigh of relief sometimes at the thought that I, at any rate, found a husband before the present man-famine began. Don’t refuse him this time, there’s a dear, or, mark my words, you’ll have cause to rue it—unless you have beforehand got engaged to somebody better than he. You will not if you have not already, for the exposure is sure to come soon.’

‘Oh, this false position!—it is ruining your nature, my too thoughtful mother! But I will not accept any of them—I’ll brazen it out!’ said Ethelberta, throwing the letter wherever it chose to fly, and picking it up to read again. She stood and thought it all over. ‘I must decide to do something!’ was her sigh again; and, feeling an irresistible need of motion, she put on her things and went out to see what resolve the morning would bring.

No rain had fallen during the night, and the air was now quiet in a warm heavy fog, through which old cider-smells, reminding her of Wessex, occasionally came from narrow streets in the background. Ethelberta passed up the Rue Grand-Pont into the little dusky Rue Saint-Romain, behind the cathedral, being driven mechanically along by the fever and fret of her

thoughts. She was about to enter the building by the transept door, when she saw Lord Mountclere coming towards her.

Ethelberta felt equal to him, or a dozen such, this morning. The looming spectres raised by her mother's information, the wearing sense of being over-weighted in the race, were driving her to a Hamlet-like fantasticism and defiance of augury; moreover, she was abroad.

'I am about to ascend to the parapets of the cathedral,' said she, in answer to a half enquiry.

'I should be delighted to accompany you,' he rejoined, in a manner as capable of explanation by his knowledge of her secret as was Ethelberta's manner by her sense of nearing the end of her maying. But whether this frequent glide into her company was meant as ephemeral flirtation, to fill the half-hours of his journey, or whether it meant a serious love-suit—which were the only alternatives that had occurred to her on the subject—did not trouble her now. 'I am bound to be civil to so great a lord,' she lightly thought, and expressing no objection to his presence, she passed with him through the outbuildings, containing Gothic lumber from the shadowy pile above, and ascended the stone staircase. Emerging from its windings, they duly came to the long wooden ladder suspended in mid-air that led to the parapet of the tower. This being wide enough for two abreast, she could hardly do otherwise than wait a moment for the viscount, who up to this

point had never faltered, and who amused her as they went by scraps of his experience in various countries, which, to do him justice, he told with vivacity and humour. Thus they reached the end of the flight, and entered behind a balustrade.

‘The prospect will be very lovely from this point when the fog has blown off,’ said Lord Mountclere, faintly, for climbing and chattering at the same time had fairly taken away his breath. He leant against the masonry to rest himself. ‘The air is clearing already; I fancy I saw a sunbeam or two.’

‘It will be lovelier above,’ said Ethelberta. ‘Let us go to the platform at the base of the *flèche*, and wait for a view there.’

‘With all my heart,’ said her attentive companion.

They passed in at a door and up some more stone steps, which landed them finally in the upper chamber of the tower. Lord Mountclere sank on a beam, and asked smilingly if her ambition was not satisfied with this goal. ‘I recollect going to the top some years ago,’ he added, ‘and it did not occur to me as being a thing worth doing a second time. And there was no fog then, either.’

‘Oh,’ said Ethelberta, ‘it is one of the most splendid things a person can do! The fog is going fast, and everybody with the least artistic feeling in the direction of bird’s-eye views makes the ascent every time of coming here.’

‘Of course, of course,’ said Lord Mountclere. ‘And I am only too happy to go to any height with you.’

‘Since you so kindly offer, we will go to the very top of the spire—up through the fog and into the sunshine,’ said Ethelberta.

Lord Mountclere covered a grim misgiving by a gay smile, and away they went up a ladder admitting to the base of the huge iron framework above; then they entered upon the regular ascent of the cage, towards the hoped-for celestial blue, and among breezes which never descended so low as the town. The journey was enlivened with more breathless witticisms from Lord Mountclere, till she stepped ahead of him again; when he asked how many more steps there were.

She enquired of the man in the blue blouse who accompanied them. ‘Fifty-five,’ she returned to Lord Mountclere a moment later.

They went round, and round, and yet around.

‘How many are there now?’ Lord Mountclere demanded, this time of the man.

‘A hundred and ninety, Monsieur,’ he said.

‘But there were only fifty-five ever so long ago!’

‘Two hundred and five, then,’ said the man. ‘Perhaps the mist prevented Mademoiselle hearing me distinctly?’

‘Never mind; I would follow were there five

thousand more, did Mademoiselle bid me !' said the exhausted nobleman, gallantly, in English.

'Hush !' said Ethelberta, with displeasure.

'He doesn't understand a word,' said Lord Mountclere.

They paced the remainder of their spiral pathway in silence, and having at last reached the summit, Lord Mountclere sank down on one of the steps, panting out, 'Dear me, dear me !'

Ethelberta leaned and looked around, and said, 'How extraordinary this is. It is sky above, below, everywhere.'

He dragged himself together and stepped to her side. They formed as it were a little world to themselves, being completely ensphered by the fog, which here was dense as a sea of milk. Below was neither town, country, nor cathedral—simply whiteness, into which the iron legs of their gigantic perch faded to nothing.

'We have lost our labour ; there is no prospect for you, after all, Lord Mountclere,' said Ethelberta, turning her eyes upon him. He looked at her face as if there were, and she continued, 'Listen ; I hear sounds from the town : people's voices, and carts, and dogs, and the noise of a railway-train. Shall we now descend, and own ourselves disappointed ?'

'Whenever you choose.'

Before they had put their intention in practice

there appeared to be reasons for waiting awhile. Out of the plain of fog beneath a stone tooth seemed to be upheaving itself: then another showed forth. These were the summits of the St. Romain and the Butter Towers—at the western end of the building. As the fog stratum collapsed other summits manifested their presence further off—among them the two spires and lantern of St. Ouen's; when to the left the dome of St. Madeline's caught a first ray from the peering sun, under which its scaly surface glittered like a fish. Then the mist rolled off in earnest, and revealed far beneath them a whole city, its red, blue, and grey roofs forming a variegated pattern, small and subdued as that of a pavement in mosaic. Eastward in the spacious outlook lay the hill of St. Catherine, breaking intrusively into the large level valley of the Seine; south was the river which had been the parent of the mist, and the Ile Lacroix, gorgeous in scarlet, purple, and green. On the western horizon could be dimly discerned melancholy forests, and further to the right stood the hill and rich groves of Boisguillaume.

Ethelberta having now done looking around, the descent was begun and continued without intermission till they came to the passage behind the parapet.

Ethelberta was about to step airily forward, when there reached her ear the voices of persons below. She recognised as one of them the slow unaccented tones of Neigh.

‘Please wait a minute!’ she said in a peremptory manner of confusion sufficient to attract Lord Mountclere’s attention.

A recollection had sprung to her mind in a moment. She had half made an appointment with Neigh at her aunt’s hotel for this very week, and here was he in Rouen to keep it. To meet him while indulging in this vagary with Lord Mountclere—which, now that the mood it had been engendered by was passing off, she somewhat regretted—would be the height of imprudence.

‘I should like to go round to the other side of the enclosure for a few moments, she said, with decisive quickness. ‘Come with me, Lord Mountclere.’

They went round to the other side. Here she kept the viscount and their *suisse* until she deemed it probable that Neigh had passed by, when she returned with her companions and proceeded. They emerged into the Rue Saint-Romain, whereupon a woman called from the opposite side of the way to their guide, stating that she had told the other English gentleman that the English lady had gone into the *flèche*.

Ethelberta turned and looked up. She could just discern Neigh’s form upon the steps of the *flèche* above, ascending toilsomely in search of her.

‘What English gentleman could that have been?’ said Lord Mountclere, after paying the man. He spoke in a way which showed he had not overlooked her con-

fusion. 'It seems that he must have been searching for us, or rather for you?'

'Only Mr. Neigh,' said Ethelberta. 'He told me he was coming here. I believe he is waiting for an interview with me.'

'H'm,' said Lord Mountclere.

'Business—only business,' said she.

'Shall I leave you? Perhaps the business is important—most important.'

'Unfortunately it is.'

'You must forgive me this once: I cannot help—will you give me permission to make a difficult remark?' said Lord Mountclere, in an impatient voice.

'With pleasure.'

'Well, then, the business I meant was—an engagement to be married.'

Had it been possible for a woman to be perpetually on the alert she might now have supposed that Lord Mountclere knew all about her; a mechanical deference must have restrained such an allusion had he seen her in any other light than that of a distracting slave. But she answered, quietly, 'So did I.'

'But how does he know—dear me, dear me! I beg pardon,' said the viscount.

She looked at him curiously, as if to imply that he was seriously out of his reckoning in respect of her if he supposed that he would be allowed to continue this little play at love-making as long as he chose,

when she was offered the position of wife by a man so good as Neigh.

They stood in silence side by side till, much to her ease, Cornelia appeared at the corner waiting. At the last moment he said, in somewhat agitated tones, and with what appeared to be a renewal of the respect which had been imperceptibly dropped since they crossed the Channel, 'I was not aware of your engagement to Mr. Neigh. I fear I have been acting mistakenly on that account.'

'There is no engagement as yet,' said she.

Lord Mountclere brightened like a child. 'Then, may I have a few words in private——'

'Not now—not to-day,' said Ethelberta, with a certain irritation at she knew not what. 'Believe me, Lord Mountclere, you are mistaken in many things. I mean, you think more of me than you ought. A time will come when you will despise me for this day's work, and it is madness in you to go further.'

Lord Mountclere, knowing what he did know, may have imagined what she referred to; but Ethelberta was without the least suspicion that he had the key to her humour. 'Well, well, I'll be responsible for the madness,' he said. 'I know you to be—a famous woman, at all events; and that's enough. I would say more, but I cannot here. May I call upon you?'

'Not now.'

'When shall I?'

‘If you must, let it be a month hence, at my house in town,’ she said indifferently, the Hamlet mood being still upon her. ‘Yes, call upon us then, and I will tell you everything that may remain to be told, if you should be inclined to listen. A rumour is afloat which will undeceive you in much, and depress me to death. And now I will walk back; pray excuse me.’ She entered the street, and joined Cornelia.

Lord Mountclere paced irregularly along, turned the corner, and went towards his inn, nearing which his tread grew lighter, till he scarcely seemed to touch the ground. He became gleeful, and said to himself, nervously palming his hip with his left hand, as if previous to plunging it into hot water for some prize: ‘Upon my life I’ve a good mind! Upon my life I have! . . . I must make a straightforward thing of it, and at once; or he will have her. But he shall not, and I will—hee-hee!’

The fascinated man, screaming inwardly with the excitement, glee, and agony of his position, entered the hotel, wrote a hasty note to Ethelberta and despatched it by hand, looked to his dress and appearance, ordered a carriage, and in a quarter of an hour was being driven towards the Hôtel Beau Séjour, whither his note had preceded him.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE HOTEL (*continued*), AND THE QUAY IN FRONT.

ETHELBERTA, having arrived there some time earlier, had gone straight to her aunt, whom she found sitting behind a large ledger in the office, making up the accounts with her husband, a well-framed reflective man with a grey beard. M. Moulin bustled, waited for her remarks and replies, and made much of her in a general way, when Ethelberta said, what she had wanted to say instantly, 'Has a gentleman called Mr. Neigh been here?'

'Oh yes—I think it is Neigh—there's a card upstairs,' replied her aunt. 'I told him you were alone at the cathedral, and I believe he walked that way. Besides that one, another has come for you—a Mr. Ladywell, and he is waiting.'

'Not for me?'

'Yes, indeed. I thought he seemed so anxious, under a sort of assumed calmness, that I recommended him to remain till you came in.'

'Goodness, aunt; why did you?' Ethelberta said,

and thought how much her mother's sister resembled her mother in doings of that sort.

‘I thought he had some good reason for seeing you. Are these men intruders, then?’

‘Oh no—a woman who attempts a public career must expect to be treated as public property: what would be an intrusion on a domiciled gentlewoman is a tribute to me. You cannot have celebrity and sex-privilege both.’ Thus Ethelberta laughed off the awkward conjuncture, inwardly deploring the unconscionable maternal meddling which had led to this, though not resentfully, for she had too much staunchness of heart to decry a parent's misdirected zeal. Had the clanship feeling been universally as strong as in the Chickerel family, the fable of the well-bonded fagot might have remained unwritten.

Ladywell had sent her a letter about getting his picture of herself engraved for an illustrated paper, and she had not replied, considering that she had nothing to do with the matter, her form and feature having been given in the painting as no portrait at all, but as those of an ideal. To see him now would be vexatious; and yet it was chilly and formal to an ungenerous degree to keep aloof from him, sitting lonely in the same house. ‘A few weeks hence,’ she thought, ‘when Menlove's disclosures make me ridiculous, he may slight me as a lackey's girl, an upstart, an adventuress, and hardly return my bow in the street. Then I may wish

I had given him no personal cause for additional bitterness.' So, putting off the fine lady, Ethelberta thought she would see Ladywell at once.

Ladywell was unaffectedly glad to meet her; so glad, that Ethelberta wished heartily, for his sake, there could be warm friendship between herself and him, as well as all her lovers, without that insistent courtship and marriage question, which sent them all scattering like leaves in a pestilent blast, at enmity with one another. She was less pleased when she found that Ladywell, after saying all there was to say about his painting, gently signified that he had been misinformed, as he believed, concerning her future intentions, which had led to his absenting himself entirely from her; the remark being, of course, a natural product of her mother's injudicious message to him.

She cut him short with terse candour. 'Yes,' she said, 'a false report is in circulation. I am not yet engaged to be married to anyone, if that is your meaning.'

Ladywell looked cheerful at this frank answer, and said, tentatively, 'Am I forgotten?'

'No; you are exactly as you always were in my mind.'

'Then I have been cruelly deceived. I was guided too much by appearances, and they were very delusive. I am beyond measure glad I came here to-day. I called at your house and learnt that you were here;

and as I was going out of town, in any indefinite direction, I settled then to come this way. What a happy idea it was! To think of you now—and I may be permitted to——’

‘Assuredly you may not. How many times I have told you that!’

‘But I do not wish for any formal engagement,’ said Ladywell, quickly, fearing she might commit herself to some expression of positive denial, which he could never surmount. ‘I’ll wait—I’ll wait any length of time. Remember, you have never absolutely forbidden my—friendship. Will you delay your answer till some time hence, when you have thoroughly considered; since I fear it may be a hasty one now?’

‘Yes, indeed; it may be hasty.’

‘You will delay it?’

‘Yes.’

‘When shall it be?’

‘Say a month hence. I suggest that, because by that time you will have found an answer in your own mind: strange things may happen before then. “She shall follow after her lovers, but she shall not overtake them; and she shall seek them, but shall not find them; then shall she say, I will go and return to my first”—however, that’s no matter.’

‘What—did you——?’ Ladywell began, altogether bewildered by this.

‘It is a passage in Hosea which came to my mind,

as possibly applicable to myself some day,' she bitterly answered. 'It was mere impulse.'

'Ha-ha!—a jest—one of your romances broken loose. There is no law for impulse: that is why I am here.'

Thus fancifully they conversed till the interview concluded. Getting her to promise that she would see him again, Ladywell retired to a sitting-room, in which he had been writing letters before she came up. Immediately upon this her aunt, who began to suspect that something peculiar was in the wind, came to tell her that Mr. Neigh had been enquiring for her again.

'Send him in,' said Ethelberta.

Neigh's footsteps approached, and the well-known figure entered. Ethelberta received him smilingly, for she was getting so used to awkward juxtapositions that she treated them quite as a natural situation. Neigh scarcely said anything as a beginning: she knew his errand perfectly; and unaccountable as it was to her, the strange and unceremonious relationship between them, that had originated in the peculiar conditions of their first close meeting, was continued now as usual.

'Have you been able to bestow a thought on the question between us? I hope so,' said Neigh.

'It is no use,' said Ethelberta. 'Wait a month, and you will not require an answer.'

'Why will that be?'

'I might say; but let us speak of something else.'

‘I don’t see how we can,’ said Neigh brusquely. ‘I had no other reason on earth for calling here. I wished to get the matter settled, and I could not be satisfied without seeing you. I hate writing on matters of this sort. In fact I can’t do it, and that’s why I am here.’

He was still speaking when an attendant entered with a note.

‘Will you excuse me one moment?’ said Ethelberta, stepping to the window and opening the missive. It contained these words only, in a scrawl so full of deformities that she could hardly piece its meaning together:—

‘I must see you again to-day unless you absolutely deny yourself to me, which I shall take as a refusal to meet me any more. I will arrive, punctually, five minutes after you receive this note. Do pray be alone if you can, and eternally gratify

‘Yours, MOUNTCLERE.’

‘If anything has happened I shall be pleased to wait,’ said Neigh, seeing her concern when she had closed the note.

‘Oh no, it is nothing,’ said Ethelberta precipitately. ‘Yet I think I will ask you to wait,’ she added, not liking to dismiss Neigh in a hurry; for she was not insensible to his perseverance in seeking her over all these miles of sea and land; and secondly, she feared

that if he were to leave on the instant he might run into the arms of Lord Mountclere.

‘I shall be only too happy to stay till you are at leisure,’ said Neigh, in the unimpassioned delivery he used whether his meaning were a trite compliment or the expression of his most earnest feeling.

‘I may be rather a long time,’ said Ethelberta dubiously.

‘My time is yours.’

Ethelberta left the room and hurried to her aunt, exclaiming, ‘Oh, aunt Charlotte, I hope you have rooms enough to spare for my visitors, for they are like the fox, the goose, and the corn, in the riddle; I cannot leave them together, and I can only be with one at a time. I want the nicest drawing-room you have for an interview of a bare two minutes with an old gentleman. I am so sorry this has happened, but it is not altogether my fault! I only arranged to see one of them; but the other was sent to me by mother, in a mistake, and the third met with me on my journey: that’s the explanation. There’s the oldest of them just come.’

She looked through the glass partition, and under the arch of the court-gate, as the wheels of the viscount’s carriage were heard outside. Ethelberta ascended to a room on the first floor, Lord Mountclere was shown up and the door closed upon them.

At this time Neigh was very comfortably lounging in an arm-chair in Ethelberta’s room on the second

floor. This was a pleasant enough way of passing the minutes with such a tender interview in prospect; and as he leant he looked with languid and luxurious interest through the open casement at the spars and rigging of some luggers on the Seine, the pillars of the suspension bridge, and the scenery of the Faubourg St. Sever on the other side of the river. How languid his interest might ultimately have become there was no knowing, had there not arisen upon his ear the accents of Ethelberta in low distinctness from somewhere outside the room.

‘Yes; the scene is pleasant to-day,’ she said. ‘I like a view over a river.’

‘I should think the steam-boats are objectionable when they stop here,’ said another person.

Neigh’s face closed in to an aspect of perplexity. ‘Surely that cannot be Lord Mountclere?’ he muttered.

Had he been certain that Ethelberta was only talking to a stranger, Neigh would probably have felt their conversation to be no business of his, much as he might have been surprised to find her giving audience to another man at such a place. But his impression that the voice was that of his acquaintance, Lord Mountclere, coupled with doubts as to its possibility, was enough to lead him to rise from the chair and put his head out of the window.

Looking right and left, he saw projecting from the next window the head of his friend Ladywell, looking

right and left likewise, apparently just drawn out by the same voice which had attracted himself.

‘What—you, Neigh!—how strange,’ came from Ladywell’s lips before he had time to recollect that great coolness existed between himself and Neigh on Ethelberta’s account, which had led to the reduction of their intimacy to the most attenuated of nods and good-mornings ever since the Harlequin-rose incident at Cripplegate.

‘Yes ; it is rather strange,’ said Neigh, with saturnine evenness. ‘Still a fellow must be somewhere.’

Each then looked over his window-sill downwards ; and upon a balcony beneath them were the speakers who had attracted them thither.

Lord Mountclere uttered something in a low tone which did not reach the young men ; to which Ethelberta replied, ‘As I have said, Lord Mountclere, I cannot give you an answer now. It is too sudden for me to decide at once. I could not do so until I have got home to England, when I will write you a letter, stating frankly my affairs and those of my relatives. I shall not consider that you have addressed me on the subject of marriage until, having received my letter you——’

‘Repeat my proposal,’ said Lord Mountclere.

‘Yes.’

‘My dear Mrs. Petherwin, it is as good as repeated ! But I have no right to assume anything you don’t wish

me to assume, and I will wait. How long is it that I am to suffer in this uncertainty?’

‘A month.’

‘A month! Really inflexible?’

Ethelberta had returned inside the window, and her answer was inaudible. Ladywell and Neigh looked up, and their eyes met. Both had been reluctant to remain where they stood, but they were too fascinated to instantly retire. Neigh moved now, and Ladywell did the same. Each saw that the face of his companion was flushed.

‘Come in and see me,’ said Ladywell, quickly, before quite withdrawing his head. ‘I am staying in this room.’

‘I will,’ said Neigh; and taking his hat he left Ethelberta’s apartment forthwith.

On entering the quarters of his friend he found him seated at a table whereon writing materials were strewn. They shook hands in silence, but the meaning in their looks was enough.

‘Just let me write a note, Ladywell, and I’m your man,’ said Neigh then, with the freedom of an old acquaintance.

‘I was going to do the same thing,’ said Ladywell.

Neigh then sat down, and for a minute or two nothing was to be heard but the scratching of a pair of pens, ending on the one side with a more boisterous

scratch, as the writer shaped 'Eustace Ladywell,' and on the other with slow firmness in the characters 'Alfred Neigh.'

'There's for you, my fair one,' said Neigh, closing and directing his letter.

'Yours is for Mrs. Petherwin? So is mine,' said Ladywell, grasping the bell-pull. 'Shall I direct it to be put on her table with this one?'

'Thanks.' And the two letters went off to Ethelberta's sitting-room, which she had vacated to receive Lord Mountclere in an empty one beneath. Neigh's letter was simply a pleading of a sudden call away which prevented his waiting till she should return; Ladywell's, though stating the same reason for leaving, was more of an upbraiding nature, and might almost have told its reader, were she to take the trouble to guess, that he knew of the business of Lord Mountclere with her to-day.

'Now, let us get out of this place,' said Neigh. He proceeded at once down the stairs, followed by Ladywell, who—settling his account at the bureau without calling for a bill, and directing his portman-teau to be sent to the Right-bank railway station—went with Neigh into the street.

They had not walked fifty yards up the quay when two British workmen, in holiday costume, who had just turned the corner of the Rue Jeanne d'Arc, approached them. Seeing him to be an Englishman,



"CAN YOU TELL US THE WAY, SIR, TO THE HOTEL BOLD SOLDIER?"

one of the two addressed Neigh, saying, 'Can you tell us the way, Sir, to the Hotel Bold Soldier?'

Neigh pointed out the place he had just come from to the tall young men, and continued his walk with Ladywell.

Ladywell was the first to break silence. 'I have been considerably misled, Neigh,' he said; 'and I imagine from what has just happened that you have been misled, too.'

'Just a little,' said Neigh, bringing abstracted lines of meditation into his face. 'But it was my own fault: for I ought to have known that these stage and platform women have what they are pleased to call Bohemianism so thoroughly engrained with their natures that they are no more constant to usage in their sentiments than they are in their way of living. Good Lord, to think she has caught Lord Mountclere! She is sure to have him if she does not dally with him so long that he gets cool again.'

'A beautiful creature like her to think of marrying such an infatuated idiot as he!'

'He can give her a title as well as younger men. It will not be the first time that such matches have been made.'

'I can't believe it,' said Ladywell, vehemently. 'She has too much poetry in her—too much good sense; her nature is the essence of all that's romantic.'

I can't help saying it, though she has treated me cruelly.'

'She has good looks, certainly. I'll own to that. As for her romance and good-feeling, that I leave to you. I think she has treated you no more cruelly, as you call it, than she has me, come to that.'

'She told me she would give me an answer in a month,' said Ladywell, emotionally.

'So she told me,' said Neigh.

'And so she told him,' said Ladywell.

'And I have no doubt she will keep her word to him in her usual precise manner.'

'But see what she implied to me! I distinctly understood from her that the answer would be favourable.'

'So did I.'

'So does he.'

'And he is sure to be the one who gets it, since only one of us can. Well, I wouldn't marry her for love, money, nor——'

'Increase.'

'Exactly: I would not. "I'll give you an answer in a month"—to all three of us! For God's sake let's sit down here and have something to drink.'

They drew up a couple of chairs to one of the tables of a wine-shop close by, and shouted to the waiter with the vigour of persons going to the dogs. Here, behind the horizontal headed trees that dotted this part of the quay, they sat over their bottles

denouncing womankind till the sun got low down upon the river, and the houses on the farther side began to be toned by a blue mist. At last they rose from their seats and departed, Neigh to dine and consider his route, and Ladywell to take the train for Dieppe.

While these incidents had been in progress the two workmen had found their way into the hotel where Ethelberta was staying. Passing through the entrance, they stood at gaze in the court, much perplexed as to the door to be made for; the difficulty was solved by the appearance of Cornelia, who in expectation of them had been for the last half-hour leaning over the sill of her bed-room window, which looked into the interior, amusing herself by watching the movements to and fro in the court beneath.

After conversing awhile in undertones as if they had no real right there at all, Cornelia told them she would call their sister, if an old gentleman who had been to see her were gone again. Cornelia then ran away, and Sol and Dan stood aloof, till they had seen the old gentleman alluded to go to the door and drive off, shortly after which Ethelberta ran down to meet them.

‘Whatever have you got as your luggage?’ she said, after hearing a few words about their journey, and looking at a curious object like a huge extended accordion with bellows of gorgeous-patterned carpeting.

‘Well, I thought to myself,’ said Sol, ‘’tis a terrible bother about carrying our things. So what did I do but turn to and make a carpet-bag that would hold all mine and Dan’s too. This, you see, Berta, is a deal top and bottom out of three-quarter stuff, stained and varnished. Well, then you see I’ve got carpet sides tacked on with these brass nails, which make it look very handsome; and so when my bag is empty ’twill shut up and be only a couple of boards under yer arm, and when ’tis open it will hold a’most anything you like to put in it. That portmantele didn’t cost more than three halfcrowns altogether, and ten pound wouldn’t ha’ got anything so strong from a portmantele maker, would it, Dan?’

‘Well, no.’

‘And then you see, Berta,’ Sol continued in the same earnest tone, and further exhibiting the article; ‘I’ve made this trap-door in the top with hinges and padlock complete, so that——’

‘I am afraid it is tiring you after your journey to explain all this to me,’ said Ethelberta gently, noticing that a few Gallic smilers were gathering round. ‘Aunt has found a nice room for you at the top of the staircase in that corner—“Escalier D” you’ll see painted at the bottom—and when you have been up come across to me at number thirty-four on this side, and we’ll talk about everything.’

‘Look here, Sol,’ said Dan, who had left his

brother and gone on to the stairs. 'What a rum staircase—the treads all in little blocks, and painted chocolate, as I am alive!'

'I am afraid I shall not be able to go on to Paris with you after all,' Ethelberta continued to Sol. 'Something has just happened which makes it desirable for me to return at once to England. But I will write a list of all you are to see, and where you are to go, so that it will make little difference I hope.'

Ten minutes before this time Ethelberta had been frankly and earnestly asked by Lord Mountclere to become his bride; not only so, but he had pressed her to consent to have the ceremony performed before they returned to England. Ethelberta had unquestionably been much surprised; and, barring the fact that the viscount was somewhat ancient in comparison with herself, the temptation to close with his offer was strong, and would have been felt as such by any woman in the position of Ethelberta, now a little reckless by stress of circumstances, and tinged with a bitterness of spirit against herself and the world generally. But she was experienced enough to know what heaviness might result from a hasty marriage, entered into with a mind full of concealments and suppressions which, if told, were likely to stop the marriage altogether; and after trying to bring herself to speak of her family and situation to Lord Mountclere as he stood, a certain caution triumphed, and she

concluded that it would be better to postpone her reply till she could consider which of two courses it would be advisable to adopt ; to write and explain to him, or to explain nothing and refuse him. The third course, to explain nothing, and hasten the wedding, she rejected without hesitation. With a pervading sense of her own obligations in forming this compact it did not occur to her to ask if Lord Mountclere might not have duties of explanation equally with herself, though bearing rather on the moral than the social aspects of the case.

Her resolution not to go on to Paris was formed simply because Lord Mountclere himself was proceeding in that direction, which might lead to other unseemly rencounters with him had she, too, persevered in her journey. She accordingly gave Sol and Dan directions for their guidance to Paris and back, starting herself with Cornelia the next day to return again to Knollsea, and to decide finally and for ever what to do in the vexed question at present agitating her.

Never before in her life had she treated marriage in such a terribly cool and cynical spirit as she had done that day ; she was almost frightened at herself in thinking of it. How far any known system of ethics might excuse her on the score of those curious pressures which had been brought to bear upon her life, or whether it could excuse her at all, she had no spirit to enquire. English society appeared a gloomy

concretion enough to abide in as she contemplated it on this journey home ; yet, since its gloominess was less an essential quality than an accident of her point of view, that point of view she had determined to change. There lay open to her two directions in which to move. She might annex herself to the easy-going high by wedding an old nobleman, or she might join for good and all the easy-going low, by plunging back to the level of her family, giving up all her ambitions for them, settling as the wife of a provincial music-master named Julian, with a little shop of fiddles and flutes, a couple of old pianos, a few sheets of stale music pinned to a string, and a narrow back parlour, wherein she would wait for the phenomenon of a customer. And each of these divergent grooves had its fascinations, till she reflected with regard to the first that, even though she were a legal and indisputable Lady Mountclere, she might be despised by my lord's circle, and left lone and lorn. The intermediate path of accepting Neigh or Ladywell had no more attractions for her taste than the fact of disappointing them had qualms for her conscience ; and how few these were may be inferred from her opinion, true or false, that two words about the spigot on her escutcheon would sweep her lovers' affections to the antipodes. She had now and then imagined that her previous intermarriage with the Petherwin family might efface much besides her surname, but expe-

rience proved that the having been wife for a few weeks to a minor who died in his father's lifetime did not weave such a tissue of glory about her course as would resist a speedy undoing by startling confessions on her station before her marriage, and her environments now.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE HOUSE IN TOWN.

RETURNING by way of Knollsea, where she remained a week or two, Ethelberta appeared one evening at the end of September before her house in Connaught Crescent, accompanied by a pair of cabs with the children and luggage; but Picotee was left at Knollsea, for reasons which Ethelberta explained when the family assembled in conclave. Her father was there, and began telling her of a surprising change in Menlove—an unasked-for concession to their cause, and a vow of secrecy which he could not account for, unless any friend of Ethelberta's had bribed her.

'Oh, no—that cannot be,' said she. Any influence of Lord Mountclere to that effect was the last thing that could enter her thoughts. 'However, what Menlove does makes little difference to me now.' And she proceeded to state that she had almost come to a decision which would entirely alter their way of living.

'I hope it will not be of the sort your last decision was,' said her mother.

'No; quite the reverse. I shall not live here in

state any longer. We will let the house throughout as lodgings, while it is ours; and you and the girls must manage it. I will retire from the scene altogether, and stay for the winter at Knollsea with Picotee. I want to consider my plans for next year, and I would rather be away from town. Picotee is left there, and I return in two days with the books and papers I require.'

'What are your plans to be?'

'I am going to be a schoolmistress—I think I am.'

'A schoolmistress?'

'Yes. And Picotee returns to the same occupation, which she ought never to have forsaken. We are going to study arithmetic and geography until Christmas; then I shall send her adrift to finish her term as pupil-teacher, while I go into a training-school. By the time I have to give up this house I shall just have got a little country school.'

'But,' said her mother aghast, 'why not write more poems and sell 'em?'

'Why not be a governess as you were?' said her father.

'Why not go on with your tales at Mayfair Hall?' said Gwendoline.

'I'll answer as well as I can. I have decided to give up romancing because I cannot think of any more that pleases me. I have been trying at Knollsea for a fortnight, and it is no use. I will never be a governess again: I would rather be a servant. If I am a school-

mistress I shall be entirely free from all contact with the great, which is what I desire, for I hate them, and am getting almost as revolutionary as Sol. Father, I cannot endure this kind of existence any longer. I sleep at night as if I had committed a murder: I start up and see processions of people, audiences, battalions of lovers obtained under false pretences—all denouncing me with the finger of ridicule. Mother's suggestion about my marrying I followed out as far as dogged resolution would carry me, but during my journey here I have broken down; for I don't want to marry a second time among people who would regard me as an upstart or intruder. I am sick of ambition. My only longing now is to fly from society altogether, and go to any hovel on earth where I could be at peace.'

'What—has anybody been insulting you?' said Mrs. Chickereel.

'Yes; or rather I sometimes think he may have: that is, if a proposal of marriage is only removed from being a proposal of a very different kind by an accident.'

'A proposal of marriage can never be an insult,' her mother returned.

'I think otherwise,' said Ethelberta.

'So do I,' said her father.

'Unless the man was beneath you, and I don't suppose he was that,' added Mrs. Chickereel.

'You are quite right; he was not that. But we will not talk of this branch of the subject. By far the

most serious concern with me is that I ought to do some good by marriage, or by heroic performance of some kind ; while going back to give the rudiments of education to remote hamleteers will do none of you any good whatever.'

'Never you mind us,' said her father ; 'mind yourself.'

'I shall hardly be minding myself either, in your opinion, by doing that,' said Ethelberta, drily. 'But it will be more tolerable than what I am doing now. Georgina, and Myrtle, and Emmeline, and Joey will not get the education I intended for them ; but that must go, I suppose.'

'How full of vagaries you are,' said her mother. 'Why won't it do to continue as you are? No sooner have I learnt up your schemes, and got enough used to 'em to see something in 'em, than you must needs bewilder me again by starting some fresh one, so that my mind gets no rest at all.'

Ethelberta too keenly felt the justice of this remark, querulous as it was, to care to defend herself. It was hopeless to attempt to explain to her mother that the oscillations of her mind might arise as naturally from the perfection of its balance, like those of a logan-stone, as from inherent lightness ; and such an explanation, however comforting to its subject, was little better than none to simple hearts who only could look to tangible outcrops.

‘Really, Ethelberta,’ remonstrated her mother, ‘this is very odd. Making yourself miserable in trying to get a position on our account is one thing, and not necessary; but I think it ridiculous to rush into the other extreme, and go wilfully down in the scale. You may just as well exercise your wits in trying to swim as in trying to sink.’

‘Yes; that’s what I think,’ said her father. ‘But of course Berta knows best.’

‘I think so too,’ said Gwendoline.

‘And so do I,’ said Cornelia. ‘If I had once moved about in large circles like Ethelberta, I wouldn’t go down and be a schoolmistress—not I.’

‘I own it is foolish—suppose it is,’ said Ethelberta wearily, and with a readiness of misgiving that showed how recent and hasty was the scheme. ‘Perhaps you are right, mother; anything rather than retreat. I wonder if you are right! Well, I will think again of it to-night. Do not let us speak more about it now.’

She did think of it that night, very long and painfully. The arguments of her relatives seemed ponderous as opposed to her own inconsequent longing for escape from galling trammels. Had she stood alone, the sentiment that she had begun to build, but was not able to finish, by whomsoever it might have been entertained, would have had few terrors; but that the opinion should be held by her nearest of kin, to cause them pain for life, was a grievous thing. The more she

thought of it the less easy seemed the justification of her desire for obscurity. From regarding it as a high instinct she passed into a humour that gave that desire the appearance of a whim. But could she really set in train events, which, if not abortive, would take her to the altar with Viscount Mountclere?

In one determination she never faltered ; to commit her sin thoroughly if she committed it at all. Her relatives believed her choice to lie between Neigh and Ladywell alone. But once having decided to pass over Christopher, whom she had loved, there could be no pausing for Ladywell because she liked him, or for Neigh in that she was influenced by him. They were both too near her level to be trusted to bear the shock of receiving her from her father's hands. But it was possible that though her genesis might tinge with vulgarity a commoner's household, susceptible of such depreciation, it might show as a picturesque contrast in the family-circle of a peer. Hence it was just as well to go to the end of her logic, where reasons for tergiversation would be most pronounced. This thought of the viscount, however, was a secret for her own breast alone.

Nearly the whole of that night she sat weighing—first, the question itself of marrying Lord Mountclere ; and, at other times, whether, for safety, she might marry him without previously revealing family particulars hitherto held necessary to be revealed—a piece of

conduct she had once felt to be indefensible. The ingenious Ethelberta, much more prone than the majority of women to theorise on conduct, felt the need of some soothing defence of the actions involved in any ambiguous course before finally committing herself to it.

She took down a well-known treatise on ethics which she had perused once before, and to which she had given her adherence ere any instance had arisen wherein she might wish to take it as a guide. Here she desultorily searched for argument, and found it; but the application of her author's philosophy to the marriage question was an operation of her own, as unjustifiable as it was likely under the circumstances.

'The ultimate end,' she read, 'with reference to and for the sake of which all other things are desirable (whether we are considering our own good or that of other people) is an existence exempt as far as possible from pain, and as rich as possible in enjoyments, both in point of quantity and quality. . . . This being, according to the utilitarian opinion, the end of human action, is necessarily also the standard of morality.'

It was an open question, so far, whether her own happiness should or should not be preferred to that of others. But that her personal interests were not to be considered as paramount appeared further on:—

'The happiness which forms the standard of what is right in conduct is not the agent's own happiness but that of all concerned. As between his own happiness

and that of others, utilitarianism requires him to be as strictly impartial as a disinterested and benevolent spectator.'

As to whose happiness was meant by that of 'other people,' 'all concerned,' and so on, her luminous moralist soon enlightened her:—

'The occasions on which any person (except one in a thousand) has it in his power to do this on an extended scale—in other words, to be a public benefactor—are but exceptional; and on these occasions alone is he called on to consider public utility; in every other case private utility, the interest or happiness of some few persons, is all he has to attend to.'

And that these few persons should be those endeared to her by every domestic tie no argument was needed to prove. That their happiness would be in proportion to her own well-doing, and power to remove their risks of indigence, required no proving either to her now.

By a sorry but unconscious misapplication of sound and wide reasoning did the active mind of Ethelberta thus find itself a solace. At about the midnight hour she felt more fortified on the expediency of marriage with Lord Mountclere than she had done at all since musing on it. In respect of the second query, whether or not, in that event, to conceal from Lord Mountclere the circumstances of her position till it should be too late for him to object to them, she found her conscience

inconveniently in the way of her theory, and the oracle before her afforded no hint. ‘Ah—it is a point for a casuist!’ she said.

An old treatise on Casuistry lay on the top shelf. She opened it—more from curiosity than for guidance this time, it must be observed—at a chapter bearing on her own problem, ‘The *disciplina arcani*, or, the doctrine of reserve.’

Here she read that there were plenty of apparent instances of this in Scripture, and that it was formed into a recognised system in the early Church. With reference to direct acts of deception, it was argued that since there were confessedly cases where killing is no murder, might there not be cases where lying is no sin? It could not be right—or, indeed anything but most absurd—to say in effect that no doubt circumstances would occur where every sound man would tell a lie, and would be a brute or a fool if he did not, and to say at the same time that it is quite indefensible in principle. Duty was the key to conduct then, and if in such cases duties appeared to clash they would be found not to do so on examination. The lesser duty would yield to the greater, and therefore ceased to be a duty.

This author she found to be not so tolerable; he distracted her. She put him aside, and gave over reading, having decided on this second point that she would, at any hazard, represent the truth to Lord

Mountclere before listening to another word from him. 'Well, at last I have done,' she said, 'and am ready for my *rôle*.'

In looking back upon her past as she retired to rest, Ethelberta could almost doubt herself to be the identical woman with her who had entered on a romantic career a few short years ago. For that doubt she had good reason. She had begun as a poet of the Satanic school in a sweetened form; she was ending as a *pseudo*-utilitarian. Was there ever such a transmutation effected before by the action of a hard environment? It was not without a qualm of regret that she discerned how the last infirmity of a noble mind had at length nearly departed from her. She wondered if her early notes had had the genuine ring in them, or whether a poet who could be thrust by realities to a distance beyond recognition as such was a true poet at all. Yet Ethelberta's gradient had been regular: emotional poetry, light verse, romance as an object, romance as a means, thoughts of marriage as an aid to her pursuits, a vow to marry for the good of her family; in other words, from soft and playful Romanticism to distorted Benthamism. Was the moral incline upward or down?

CHAPTER XXXIX.

KNOLLSEA—AN ORNAMENTAL VILLA.

HER energies collected and fermented anew by the results of the vigil, Ethelberta left town for Knollsea, where she joined Picotee the same evening. Picotee produced a letter, which had been addressed to her sister at their London residence, but was not received by her there, Mrs. Chickereel having forwarded it to Knollsea the day before Ethelberta arrived in town.

The crinkled writing, in character like the coast-line of Terra del Fuego, was becoming familiar by this time. While reading the note she informed Picotee, between a quick breath and a rustle of frills, that it was from Lord Mountclere, who wrote on the subject of calling to see her, suggesting a day in the following week. ‘Now, Picotee,’ she continued, ‘we shall have to receive him, and make the most of him, for I have altered my plans since I was last in Knollsea.’

‘Altered them again? What are you going to be now—not a poor person after all?’

‘Indeed not. And so I turn and turn. Can you

imagine what Lord Mountclere is coming for? But don't say what you think. Before I reply to this letter we must go into new lodgings, to give them as our address. The first business to-morrow morning will be to look for the gayest house we can find; and Captain Flower and this little cabin of his must be things we have never known.'

The next day after breakfast they accordingly sallied forth. Knollsea had recently begun to attract notice in the world. It had this year undergone visitation from a score of professional gentlemen and their wives, a minor canon, three marine painters, seven young ladies with books in their hands, and nine-and-thirty babies. Hence a few lodging-houses, of a dash and pretentiousness far beyond the mark of the old cottages which formed the original substance of the village, had been erected to meet the wants of such as these. To a building of this class Ethelberta now bent her steps, and the crush of the season having departed in the persons of three-quarters of the above-named visitors, who went away by a coach, a van, and a couple of wagonettes one morning, she found no difficulty in arranging for a red and yellow streaked villa, which was so bright and glowing that the sun seemed to be shining upon it even on a cloudy day, and the ruddiest native looked pale when standing by its walls. It was not without regret that she renounced the sailor's pretty cottage for this porticoed and balconied

dwelling ; but her lines were laid down clearly at last, and thither they removed forthwith. From this brand-new house did Ethelberta pen the letter naming the time at which she would be pleased to see Lord Mountclere.

When the hour drew nigh enormous force of will was required to keep her perturbation down. She had not distinctly told Picotee of the object of the viscount's visit, but Picotee guessed nearly enough. Ethelberta was upon the whole better pleased that the initiative had again come from him than she would have felt if the first step in the new campaign had been her sending the explanatory letter, as intended and promised. She had thought almost directly after the interview at Rouen that to enlighten him by writing a confession in cold blood, according to her first intention, would be little less awkward for her in the method of telling than in the facts to be told.

So the last hair was arranged and the last fold adjusted, and she sat down to await a new page of her history. Picotee sat with her, under orders to go into the next room when Lord Mountclere should call ; and Ethelberta determined to waste no time, directly he began to make advances, in clearing up the phenomena of her existence to him ; to the end that no fact which, in the event of his taking her to wife, could be used against her as an example of concealment, might remain unrelated. The collapse of his attachment under the

test might, however, form the grand climax of such a play as this.

The day was rather cold for the season, and Ethelberta sat by a fire; but the windows were open, and Picotee was amusing herself on the balcony outside. The hour struck: Ethelberta fancied she could hear the wheels of a carriage creeping up the steep ascent which led to the drive before the door.

‘Is it he?’ she said quickly.

‘No,’ said Picotee, whose indifference contrasted strangely with the restlessness of her who was usually the coolest. ‘It is a man shaking down apples in the garden over the wall.’

They lingered on till some three or four minutes had gone by. ‘Surely that’s a carriage?’ said Ethelberta then.

‘I think it is,’ said Picotee outside, stretching her neck forward as far as she could. ‘No, it is the men on the beach dragging up their boats; they expect wind to-night.’

‘How wearisome! Picotee, you may as well come inside; if he means to call he will; but he ought to be here by this time.’

It was only once more, and that some time later, that she again said ‘Listen!’

‘That’s not the noise of a carriage; it is the fizz of a rocket. The coastguardsmen are practising the life-apparatus to-day, to be ready for the autumn wrecks.’

‘Ah!’ said Ethelberta, her face clearing up. Hers had not been a sweetheart’s impatience, but her mood had intensified during these minutes of suspense to a harassing mistrust of her man-compelling power, which was, if that were possible, more gloomy than disappointed love. ‘I know now where he is. That operation with the cradle-apparatus is very interesting, and he is stopping to see it. . . . But I shall not wait indoors much longer, whatever he may be stopping to see. It is very unaccountable, and vexing, after moving into this new house too. We were much more comfortable in the old one. In keeping any previous appointment in which I have been concerned he has been ridiculously early.’

‘Shall I run round?’ said Picotee, ‘and if he is not watching them we will go out.’

‘Very well,’ said her sister.

The time of Picotee’s absence seemed an age. Ethelberta heard the roar of another rocket, and still Picotee did not return. ‘What can the girl be thinking of?’ she thought. . . . ‘What a half-and-half policy mine has been! Thinking of marrying for position, and yet not making it my rigid plan to secure the man the first moment that he made his offer. So I lose the comfort of having a soul above worldliness, and my compensation for not having it likewise!’ A minute or two more and in came Picotee.

‘What has kept you so long—and how excited you look!’ said Ethelberta.

‘I thought I would stay a little while, as I had never seen a rocket-apparatus,’ said Picotee faintly and strangely.

‘But is he there?’ asked her sister impatiently.

‘Yes—he was. He’s gone now!’

‘Lord Mountclere?’

‘No. There is no old man there at all. Mr. Julian was there.’

A little ‘Ah!’ came from Ethelberta, like a note from a storm-bird at night. She turned round and went into the back room. ‘Is Mr. Julian going to call here?’ she enquired, coming forward again.

‘No—he’s gone by the steamboat. He was only passing through on his way to Sandbourne, where he is gone to settle a small business relating to his father’s affairs. He was not in Knollsea ten minutes, owing to something which detained him on the way.’

‘Did he enquire for me?’

‘No. And only think, Ethelberta—such a remarkable thing has happened, though I nearly forgot to tell you. He says that coming along the road he was overtaken by a carriage, and when it had just passed him one of the horses shied, pushed the other down a slope, and overturned the carriage. One wheel came off and trundled to the bottom of the hill by itself. Christopher of course ran up, and helped out of the

carriage an old gentleman—now do you know what's likely?'

'It was Lord Mountclere. I am glad that's the cause,' said Ethelberta involuntarily.

'I imagined you would suppose it to be Lord Mountclere. But Mr. Julian did not know the gentleman, and said nothing about who he might be.'

'Did he describe him?'

'Not much—just a little.'

'Well?'

'He said he was a sly old dog apparently, to hear how he swore in whispers. This affair is what made Mr. Julian so late that he had no time to call here. Lord Mountclere's ankle—if it was Lord Mountclere—was badly sprained. But the servants were not injured, beyond a scratch on the coachman's face. Then they got another carriage and drove at once back again. It must be he, or else why is he not come? It is a pity, too, that Mr. Julian was hindered by this, so that there was no opportunity for him to bide a bit in Knollsea.'

Ethelberta was not disposed to believe that Christopher would have called, had time favoured him to the utmost. Between himself and her there was that kind of division which is more insurmountable than enmity; for estrangements produced by good judgment will last when those of feeling break down in smiles. Not the lovers who part in passion, but the lovers who part in friendship, are those who most frequently part for ever.

‘Did you tell Mr. Julian that the injured gentleman was possibly Lord Mountclere, and that he was coming here?’ said Ethelberta.

‘I made no remark at all—I did not think of him till afterwards.’

The enquiry was hardly necessary, for Picotee’s words would dry away like a brook in the sands when she held conversation with Christopher.

As they had anticipated, the sufferer was no other than their intending visitor. Next morning there was a note explaining the accident, and expressing its writer’s suffering from the cruel delay as greater than that from the swollen ankle, which was progressing favourably.

Nothing further was heard of Lord Mountclere for more than a week, when she received another letter, which put an end to her season of relaxation, and once more braced her to the contest. This epistle was very nicely written, and in point of correctness, propriety, and gravity, might have come from the quill of a bishop. Herein the old nobleman gave a further description of the accident, but the main business of the communication was to ask her if, since he was not as yet very active, she would come to Lychworth Court and delight himself and a small group of friends who were visiting there.

She pondered over the letter as she walked by the shore that day, and after some hesitation decided to go.

CHAPTER XL.

LYCHWORTH COURT.

It was on a dull, stagnant, noiseless afternoon of autumn that Ethelberta first crossed the threshold of Lychworth Court. The daylight was so lowered by the imperious roof of cloud overhead that it scarcely reached further into Lord Mountclere's entrance-hall than to the splays of the windows, even but an hour or two after midday; and indoors the glitter of the fire reflected itself from the very panes, so inconsiderable were the opposing rays.

Lychworth Court, in its main part, had not been standing more than a hundred years. At that date the weakened portions of the original mediæval structure were pulled down and cleared away, old jambs being carried off for rick-staddles, and the foliated timbers of the hall roof making themselves useful as fancy chairs in the summer-houses of rising inns. A new block of masonry was built up from the ground of such height and lordliness that the remnant of the old pile left standing became as a mere cup-bearer and culinary menial beside it. The rooms in this old fragment, which

had in times past been considered sufficiently dignified for dining-hall, withdrawing-room, and so on, were now reckoned barely high enough for sculleries, servants' hall, and laundries, the whole of which were arranged therein.

The modern portion had been planned with such a total disregard of association, that the very rudeness of the contrast gave an interest to the mass which it might have wanted had perfect harmony been attempted between the old nucleus and its adjuncts, a probable result if the enlargement had taken place later on in time. The issue was that the hooded windows, simple string-courses, and random masonry of the Gothic workman stood elbow to elbow with the equal-spaced ashlar, architraves, and fasciæ of the Classic addition, each telling its distinct tale as to stage of thought and domestic habit without any of those artifices of blending or restoration by which the seeker for history in stones will be utterly hoodwinked in time to come.

To the left of the door and vestibule which Ethelberta passed through rose the principal staircase, constructed of a freestone so milkwhite and delicately moulded as to be easily conceived in the lamp-light as of biscuit-ware. Who, unacquainted with the secrets of geometrical construction, could imagine that, hanging so airily there, to all appearance supported on nothing, were twenty or more tons dead-weight of stone, that would have made a prison for an elephant if so ar-

ranged? The art which produced this illusion was questionable, but its success was undoubted. ‘How lovely!’ said Ethelberta, as she looked at the fairy ascent. ‘His staircase alone is worth my hand!’

Passing along by the colonnade, which partly fenced the staircase from the visitor, the saloon was reached, an apartment forming a double cube. About the left-hand end of this were grouped the drawing-rooms and library; while on the right was the dining-hall, with billiard, smoking, and gun-rooms in mysterious remoteness beyond.

Without attempting to trace an analogy between a man and his mansion it may be stated that everything here, though so dignified and magnificent, was not conceived in quite the true and eternal spirit of art. It was a house in which Pugin would have torn his hair. Those massive blocks of red-veined marble lining the hall—emulating in their surface-glitter the *Escalier de Marbre* at Versailles—were cunning imitations in paint and plaster by workmen brought from afar for the purpose, at a prodigious expense, by the present viscount’s father, and recently repaired and re-varnished. The dark green columns and pilasters corresponding were brick at the core. Nay, the external walls, apparently of massive and solid freestone, were only veneered with that material, being, like the pillars, of brick within.

To a stone mask worn by a brick face a story

naturally appertained—one which has since done service in other quarters. When the vast addition had just been completed King George visited Lychworth. Its owner pointed out the features of its grand architectural attempt, and waited for commendation.

‘Brick, brick, brick,’ said the king.

The Georgian Lord Mountclere blushed faintly, albeit to his very poll, and said nothing more about his house that day. When the king was gone he sent frantically for the craftsmen recently dismissed, and soon the green lawns became again the colour of a Nine-Elms cement wharf. Thin freestone slabs were affixed to the whole series of fronts by copper cramps and dowels, each one of substance sufficient to have furnished a poor boy’s pocket with pennies for a month, till not a speck of the original surface remained, and the edifice shone in all the grandeur of massive masonry that was not massive at all. But who remembered this save the builder and his crew? and as long as nobody knew the truth, pretence looked just as well.

What was honest in Lychworth Court was that portion of the original edifice which still remained, now degraded to subservient uses. Where the untitled Mountclere of the White Rose faction had spread his knees over the brands when the place was a castle and not a court, the still-room maid now simmered her preserves; and where Elizabethan mothers and daughters of that sturdy line had tapestried the love-scenes of Isaac and

Jacob, boots and shoes were now cleaned and coals stowed away.

Lord Mountclere had so far recovered from the sprain as to be nominally quite well, under pressure of a wish to receive guests. The sprain had in one sense served him excellently. He had now a reason, apart from that of years, for walking with his stick, and took care to let the reason be frequently known. To-day he entertained a larger number of persons than had been assembled within his walls for a great length of time.

Until after dinner Ethelberta felt as if she were staying at an hotel. Few of the people whom she had met at the meeting of the Imperial Association greeted her here. The viscount's brother was not present, but Sir Cyril Blandsbury and his wife were there, a lively pair of persons, entertaining as actors, and friendly as dogs. Beyond these all the faces and figures were new to her, though they were handsome and dashing enough to satisfy a court-clothier. Ethelberta, in a dress sloped about as high over the shoulder as would have drawn approval from Reynolds, and expostulation from Lely, thawed and thawed each friend who came near her, and sent him or her away smiling; yet she felt a little surprise. She had seldom visited at a country-house, and knew little of the ordinary composition of a group of visitors within its walls; but the present assemblage seemed to want much of that old-fashioned stability

and quaint monumental dignity she had expected to find under this historical roof. Nobody of her entertainer's own rank appeared. Not a single clergyman was there. A tendency to talk Walpolean scandal about foreign courts was particularly manifest. And although tropical travellers, Indian officers and their wives, courteous exiles, and descendants of Irish kings, were infinitely more pleasant than Lord Mountclere's landed neighbours would probably have been, to such a cosmopolite as Ethelberta a calm Tory or old Whig company would have given a greater treat. They would have struck as gratefully upon her senses as sylvan scenery after crags and cliffs, or silence after the roar of a cataract.

It was evening, and all these personages at Lychworth Court were merry, snug, and warm within its walls. Dinner-time had passed, and everything had gone on well, when Mrs. Tara O'Fanagan, who had a gold-clamped tooth, which shone every now and then, asked Ethelberta if she would amuse them by telling a story, since nobody present, except Lord Mountclere, had ever heard one from her lips.

Seeing that Ethelberta had been working at that art as a profession, it can hardly be said that the question was conceived with tact, though it was put with grace. Lord Mountclere evidently thought it objectionable, for he looked unhappy. To only one person in the brilliant room did the request appear as a timely

accident, and that was to Ethelberta herself. Her honesty was always making war upon her manœuvres, and shattering their delicate meshes, to her great inconvenience and delay. Thus there arose those devious impulses and tangential flights which spoil the works of every would-be schemer who instead of being wholly machine is half heart. One of these now was to show herself as she really was, not only to Lord Mountclere, but to his friends assembled, whom, in her ignorance, she respected more than they deserved, and so get rid of that self-reproach which had by this time reached a morbid pitch, through her over-sensitiveness to a situation in which a large majority of women and men would have seen no falseness.

Full of this curious intention, she quietly assented to the request, and laughingly bade them put themselves in listening order.

‘An old story will suit us,’ said the lady who had importuned her. ‘We have never heard one.’

‘No; it shall be quite new,’ she replied. ‘One not yet made public; though it soon will be.’

The narrative began by introducing to their notice a girl of the poorest and meanest parentage, the daughter of a serving-man, and the fifth of ten children. She graphically recounted, as if they were her own, the strange dreams and ambitious longings of this child when young, her attempts to acquire education, partial failures, partial successes, and constant struggles; in-

stancing how, on one of these occasions, the girl concealed herself under a bookcase of the library belonging to the mansion in which her father served as footman, and having taken with her there, like a young Fawkes, matches and a halfpenny candle, was going to sit up all night reading when the family had retired, until her father discovered and prevented her scheme. Then followed her experiences as nursery-governess, her evening lessons under self-selected masters, and her ultimate rise to a higher grade among the teaching sisterhood. Next came another epoch. To the mansion in which she was engaged returned a truant son, between whom and the heroine an attachment sprang up. The master of the house was an ambitious gentleman just knighted, who, perceiving the state of their hearts, harshly dismissed the homeless governess, and rated the son, the consequence being that the youthful pair resolved to marry secretly, and carried their resolution into effect. The runaway journey came next, and then a moving description of the death of the young husband, and the terror of the bride.

The guests began to look perplexed, and one or two exchanged whispers. This was not at all the kind of story that they had expected; it was quite different from her usual utterances, the nature of which they knew by report. Ethelberta kept her eye upon Lord Mountclere. Soon, to her amazement, there was that

in his face which told her that he knew the story and its heroine quite well. When she delivered the sentence ending with the professedly fictitious words: 'I thus was reduced to great distress, and vainly cast about me for directions what to do,' Lord Mountclere's manner became so excited and anxious that it acted reciprocally upon Ethelberta; her voice trembled, she moved her lips but uttered nothing. To bring the story up to the date of that very evening had been her intent, but it was beyond her power. The spell was broken; she blushed with distress and turned away, for the folly of a disclosure here was but too apparent.

Though everyone saw that she had broken down, none of them appeared to know the reason why, or to have the clue to her performance. Fortunately Lord Mountclere came to her aid.

'Let the first part end here,' he said, rising and approaching her. 'We have been well entertained so far. I could scarcely believe that the story I was listening to was utterly an invention, so vividly does Mrs. Petherwin bring the scenes before our eyes. She must now be exhausted: we will have the remainder to-morrow.'

They all agreed that this was well, and soon after fell into groups, and dispersed about the rooms. When everybody's attention was thus occupied Lord Mountclere whispered to Ethelberta tremulously, 'Don't tell

more : you think too much of them : they are no better than you. Will you meet me in the little winter garden two minutes hence? Pass through that door, and along the glass passage.' He himself left the room by an opposite door.

She had not set three steps in the warm snug octagon of glass and plants when he appeared on the other side.

'You knew it all before!' she said, looking keenly at him. 'Who told you, and how long have you known it?'

'Before yesterday, or last week,' said Lord Mountclere. 'Even before we met in France. Why are you so surprised?'

Ethelberta had been surprised, and very greatly, to find him, as it were, secreted in the very rear of her position. That nothing she could tell was new to him was a good deal to think of, but it was little beside the recollection that he had actually made his first declaration in the face of that knowledge of her which she had supposed so fatal to all her matrimonial ambitions.

'And now only one point remains to be settled,' he said, taking her hand. 'You promised at Rouen that at our next interview you would honour me with a decisive reply—one to make me happy for ever.'

'But my father and friends?' said she.

'Are nothing to be concerned about. Modern developments have shaken up the classes like peas

in a hopper. An annuity, and a comfortable cottage——'

'My brothers are workmen.'

'Manufacture is the single vocation in which a man's prospects may be said to be illimitable. Hee-hee!—they may buy me up before they die! And now what stands in the way? It would take fifty alliances with fifty families so little disreputable as yours, darling, to drag mine down.'

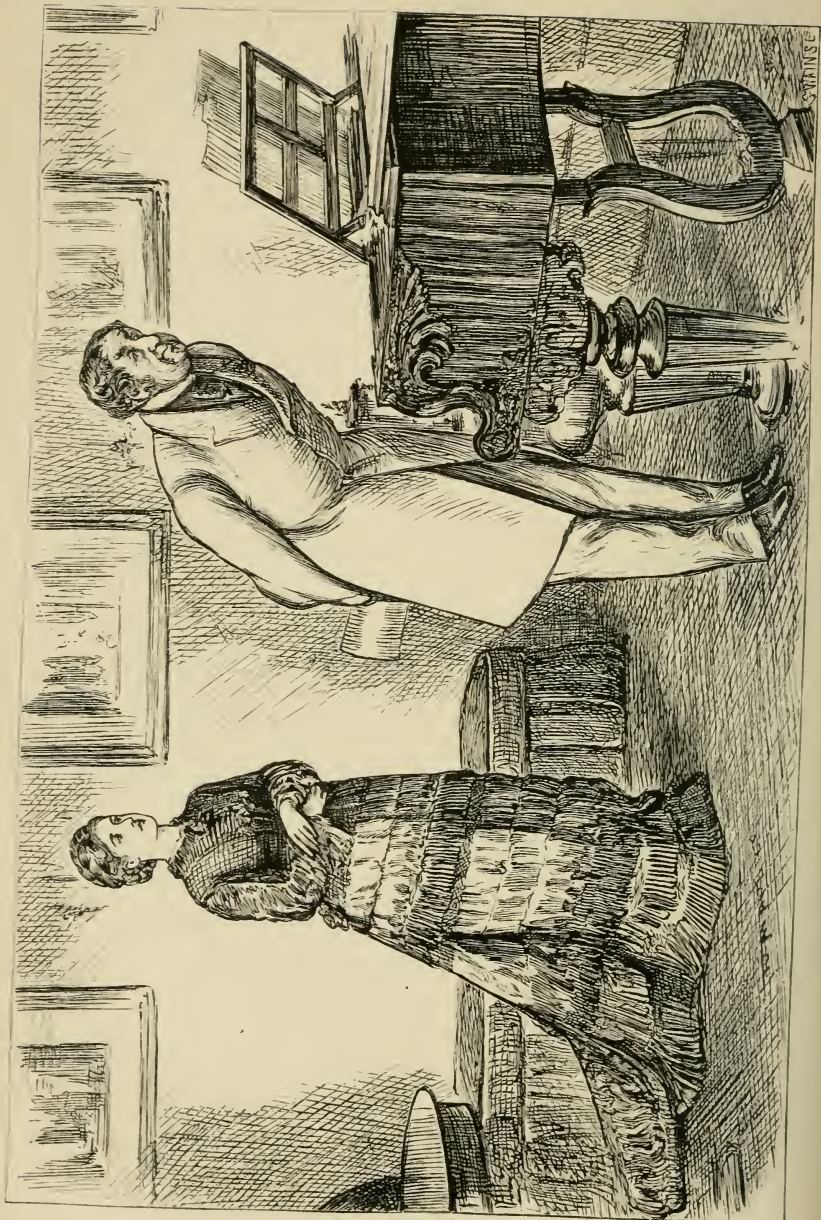
Ethelberta had anticipated the scene, and settled her course; what had to be said and done here was mere formality; yet she had been unable to go straight to the assent required. However, after these words of self-depreciation, which were let fall apparently as much for her own future ease of conscience as for his present warning, she made no more ado.

'I shall think it a great honour to be your wife,' she said, simply.

CHAPTER XLI.

KNOLLSEA—MELCHESTER.

THE year was now moving on apace, but Ethelberta and Picotee chose to remain at Knollsea, in the brilliant variegated brick and stone villa to which they had removed in order to be in keeping with their ascending fortunes. Autumn had begun to make itself felt and seen in bolder and less subtle ways than at first. In the morning now, on coming downstairs, in place of a yellowish-green leaf or two lying in a corner of the lowest step, which had been the only previous symptoms around the house, she saw dozens of them playing at corkscrews in the wind, directly the door was opened. Beyond, towards the sea, the slopes and scarps that had been muffled with a thick robe of cliff herbage, were showing their chill grey substance through the withered verdure, like the background of velvet whence the pile has been fretted away. Unexpected breezes broomed and rasped the smooth bay in evanescent patches of stippled shade, and, besides the small boats, the ponderous lighters used in shipping stone were hauled up the beach in anticipation of the equinoctial attack.



11. IN THE WRITING OF THE COMPOSER. OBSERVED BY LORD MONTAGU AND HIS WIFE.

SWINNEY

A few days after Ethelberta's reception at Lychworth, an improved stanhope, driven by Lord Mountclere himself, climbed up the hill until it was opposite her door. A few notes from a piano softly played reached his ear as he descended from his place: on being shown in to his betrothed, he could perceive that she had just left the instrument. Moreover, a tear was visible in her eye when she came near him.

They discoursed for several minutes in the manner natural between a defenceless young widow and an old widower in Lord Mountclere's position to whom she was engaged—a great deal of formal considerateness making itself visible on her part, and of extreme tenderness on his. While thus occupied, he turned to the piano, and casually glanced at a piece of music lying open upon it. Some words of writing at the top expressed that it was the composer's original copy, presented by him, Christopher Julian, to the author of the song. Seeing that he noticed the sheet somewhat lengthily, Ethelberta remarked that it had been an offering made to her a long time ago—a melody written to one of her own poems.

‘In the writing of the composer,’ observed Lord Mountclere, with interest. ‘An offering from the musician himself—very gratifying and touching. Mr. Christopher Julian is the name I see upon it, I believe? I knew his father, Dr. Julian—a Sandbourne man, if I recollect.’

‘Yes,’ said Ethelberta, placidly. But it was really with an effort. The song was the identical one which Christopher sent up to her from Sandbourne when the fire of her hope burnt high for less material ends; and the discovery of the sheet among her music that day had started eddies of emotion for some time checked.

‘I am sorry you have been grieved,’ said Lord Mountclere, with gloomy restlessness.

‘Grieved?’ said Ethelberta.

‘Did I not see a tear there? or did my eyes deceive me?’

‘You might have seen one.’

‘Ah! a tear, and a song. I think——’

‘You naturally think that a woman who cries over a man’s gift must be in love with the giver?’ Ethelberta looked him serenely in the face.

Lord Mountclere’s jealous suspicions were considerably shaken.

‘Not at all,’ he said hastily, as if ashamed. ‘One who cries over a song is much affected by its sentiment.’

‘Do you expect authors to cry over their own words?’ she enquired, merging defence in attack. ‘I am afraid they don’t often do that.’

‘You would make me uneasy.’

‘On the contrary, I would reassure you. Are you not still doubting?’ she asked, with a pleasant smile.

‘I cannot doubt you!’

‘Swear, like a faithful knight.’

‘I swear, my fairy, my flower!’

After this the old man appeared to be pondering; indeed, his thoughts could hardly be said to be present when he uttered the words. For though the tabernacle was getting shaky by reason of years and merry living, so that what was going on inside might often be guessed without by the movement of the hangings, as in a puppet-show with worn canvas, he could be quiet enough when scheming any plot of particular neatness, which had less emotion than impishness in it. Such an innocent amusement he was pondering now.

Before leaving her, he asked if she would accompany him to a morning instrumental concert at Melchester, which was to take place in the course of that week for the benefit of some local institution.

‘Melchester,’ she repeated faintly, and observed him as searchingly as it was possible to do without exposing herself to a raking fire in return. Could he know that Christopher was living there, and was this said in prolongation of his recent suspicion? But Lord Mountclere’s face gave no sign.

‘You forget one fatal objection,’ said she; ‘the secrecy in which it is imperative that the engagement between us should be kept.’

‘I am not known in Melchester without my carriage; nor are you.’

‘We may be known by somebody on the road.’

‘Then let it be arranged in this way. I will not call here to take you up, but will meet you at the station at Anglebury; and we can go on together by train without notice. Surely there can be no objection to that? It would be mere prudishness to object, since we are to become one so shortly.’ He spoke a little impatiently. It was plain that he particularly wanted her to go to Melchester.

‘I merely meant that there was a chance of discovery in our going out together. And discovery means no marriage.’ She was pale now, and sick at heart, for it seemed that the viscount must be aware that Christopher dwelt at that place, and was about to test her concerning him.

‘Why does it mean no marriage?’ said he.

‘My father might, and almost certainly would, object to it. Although he cannot control me he might entreat me.’

‘Why would he object?’ said Lord Mountclere, uneasily and somewhat haughtily.

‘I don’t know.’

‘But you will be my wife—say again that you will.’

‘I will.’

He breathed. ‘He will not object—hee-hee!’ he said. ‘Oh, no—I think you will be mine now.’

‘I have said so. But look to me all the same.’

‘You malign yourself, dear one. But you will

meet me at Anglebury, as I wish, and go on to Melchester with me?’

‘I shall be pleased to—if my sister may accompany me.’

‘Ah—your sister. Yes, of course.’

They settled the time of the journey, and when the visit had been stretched out as long as it reasonably could be with propriety, Lord Mountclere took his leave.

When he was again seated on the driving-phaeton which he had brought that day, Lord Mountclere looked gleeful, and shrewd enough in his own opinion to outwit Mephistopheles. As soon as they were ascending a hill, and he could find time to free his hand, he pulled off his glove, and drawing from his pocket a programme of the Melchester concert referred to, contemplated therein the name of one of the intended performers. The name was that of Mr. C. Julian. Replacing it again, he looked ahead, and some time after murmured with wily mirth, ‘An excellent test—a lucky thought!’

Nothing of importance transpired during the intervening days. At two o'clock on the appointed afternoon Ethelberta stepped from the train at Melchester with the viscount, who had met her as proposed; she was followed behind by Picotee. The concert was to be held at the Town-hall half an hour later. They entered a fly in waiting, and secure from recognition,

were driven leisurely in that direction, Picotee silent and absorbed with her own thoughts.

‘There’s the cathedral,’ said Lord Mountclere humorously, as they caught a view of one of its towers through a street leading into the Close.

‘Yes.’

‘It boasts of a very fine organ.’

‘Ah.’

‘And the organist is a clever young man.’

‘Oh.’

Lord Mountclere paused a moment or two. ‘By the way, you may remember that he is the Mr. Julian who set your song to music!’

‘I recollect it quite well.’ Her heart was horrified, and she thought Lord Mountclere must be developing into an inquisitor, which perhaps he was. But none of this reached her face.

They turned in the direction of the Hall, were set down, and entered.

The large assembly-room set apart for the concert was upstairs, and it was possible to enter it in two ways: by the large doorway in front of the landing, or by turning down a side passage leading to council-rooms and subsidiary apartments of small size, which were allotted to performers in any exhibition; thus they could enter from one of these directly upon the platform, without passing through the audience.

‘Will you seat yourselves here?’ said Lord Mount-

clere, who, instead of entering by the direct door, had brought the young women round into this green-room, as it may be called. 'You see we have come in privately enough; when the musicians arrive we can pass through behind them, and step down to our seats from the front.'

The players could soon be heard tuning in the next room. Then one came through the passage-room where the three waited, and went in, then another, then another. Last of all came Julian.

Ethelberta sat facing the door, but Christopher, never in the least expecting her there, did not recognise her till he was quite inside. When he had really perceived her to be the one who had troubled his soul so many times and long, the blood in his face—never very much—passed off and left it, like the shade of a cloud. Between them stood a table covered with green baize, which, reflecting upwards a band of sunlight shining across the chamber, flung upon his already white features the virescent hues of death. The poor musician, whose person, much to his own inconvenience, constituted a complete breviary of the gentle emotions, looked as if he were going to fall down in a faint.

Ethelberta flung at Lord Mountclere a look which clipped him like pincers: he never forgot it as long as he lived.

'This is your pretty jealous scheme—I see it!' she

hissed to him, and without being able to control herself went across to Julian.

But a slight gasp came from behind the door where Picotee had been sitting. Ethelberta and Lord Mountclere looked that way; and behold, Picotee had nearly swooned.

Ethelberta's show of passion went as quickly as it had come, for she felt that a splendid triumph had been put into her hands. 'Now do you see the truth?' she whispered to Lord Mountclere without a drachm of feeling; pointing to Christopher and then to Picotee—as like as two snowdrops now.

'I do, I do,' murmured the viscount hastily.

They both went forward to help Christopher in restoring the fragile Picotee: he had set himself to that task as suddenly as he possibly could to cover his own near approach to the same condition. Not much help was required, the little girl's indisposition being quite momentary, and she sat up in the chair again.

'Are you better?' said Ethelberta to Christopher.

'Quite well—quite,' he said, smiling faintly. 'I am glad to see you. I must, I think, go into the next room now.' He bowed and walked out awkwardly.

'Are you better, too?' she said to Picotee.

'Quite well,' said Picotee.

'You are quite sure you know between whom the love lies now—eh?' Ethelberta asked in a sarcastic whisper of Lord Mountclere.

‘I am—beyond a doubt,’ murmured the anxious nobleman; he feared that look of hers, which was not less dominant than irresistible.

Some additional moments given to thought on the circumstances rendered Ethelberta still more indignant and intractable. She went out at the door by which they had entered, along the passage, and down the stairs. A shuffling footstep followed, but she did not turn her head. When they reached the bottom of the stairs the carriage had gone, their exit not being expected till two hours later. Ethelberta, nothing daunted, swept along the pavement and down the street in a turbulent prance, Lord Mountclere trotting behind with a jowl reduced to a mere nothing by his concern at the discourtesy into which he had been lured by jealous whisperings.

‘My dearest—forgive me; I confess I doubted you—but I was beside myself,’ came to her ears from over her shoulder. But Ethelberta walked on as before.

Lord Mountclere sighed like a poet over a ledger. ‘An old man—who is not very old—naturally torments himself with fears of losing—no, no—it was an innocent jest of mine—you will forgive a joke—hee-hee?’ he said again on getting no reply.

‘You had no right to mistrust me!’

‘I do not—you did not blench. You should have told me before that it was your sister and not yourself who was entangled with him.’

‘ You brought me to Melchester on purpose to confront him.’

‘ Yes, I did.’

‘ Are you not ashamed?’

‘ I am satisfied. It is better to know the truth by any means than to die of suspense; better for us both—surely you see that?’

They had by this time got to the end of a long street, and into a deserted side road by which the station could be indirectly reached. Picotee appeared in the distance as a mere distracted speck of girlhood, following them because not knowing what else to do in her sickness of body and mind. Once out of sight here, Ethelberta began to cry.

‘ Ethelberta,’ said Lord Mountclere, in an agony of trouble, ‘ don’t be vexed. It was an inconsiderate trick—I own it. Do what you will, but do not desert me now! I could not bear it—you would kill me if you were to leave me. Anything, but be mine.’

Ethelberta continued her way, and drying her eyes entered the station, where, on searching the time-tables, she found there would be no train for Anglebury for the next two hours. Then more slowly she turned towards the town again, meeting Picotee and keeping in her company.

Lord Mountclere gave up the chase, but as he wished to get into the town again, he followed in the same direction. When Ethelberta had proceeded

as far as the Mitre Hotel, she turned towards it with her companion, and being shown to a room, the two sisters shut themselves in. Lord Mountclere paused and entered the Crown, the rival hotel to the Mitre, which stood on the opposite side of the way.

Having secluded himself in an apartment here, walked from window to window awhile, and made himself generally uncomfortable, he sat down to the writing materials on the table, and concocted a note :

‘ Crown Hotel.

‘ My dear Mrs. Petherwin,—You do not mean to be so cruel as to break your plighted word to me? Remember, there is no love without much jealousy, and lovers are ever full of sighs and misgiving. I have owned to as much contrition as can reasonably be expected. I could not endure the suspicion that you loved another.

‘ Yours always,

‘ MOUNTCLERE.’

This he sent, watching from the window its progress across the street. He waited anxiously for an answer, and waited long. It was nearly twenty minutes before he could hear a messenger approaching the door. Yes—she had actually sent a reply ; he prized it as if it had been the first encouragement he had ever in his life received from woman :

‘My Lord,’ wrote Ethelberta,—‘I am not prepared at present to enter into the question of marriage at all. The incident which has occurred affords me every excuse for withdrawing my promise, since it was given under misapprehensions on a point that materially affects my happiness.

‘E. PETHERWIN.’

‘Ho-ho-ho—Miss Hoity-toity!’ said Lord Mountclere, trotting up and down. But, remembering it was her June against his November, this did not last long, and he frantically replied :

‘My darling,—I cannot release you—I must do anything to keep my treasure. Will you not see me for a few minutes, and let bygones go to the winds?’

Was ever a thrush so safe in a cherry net before!

The messenger came back with the information that Mrs. Petherwin had taken a walk to the Close, her companion only remaining at the hotel. There being nothing else left for the viscount to do, he put on his hat, and went out on foot in the same direction. He had not walked far when he saw Ethelberta moving slowly along the High Street before him.

Ethelberta was at this hour wandering without any fixed intention beyond that of consuming time. She was very wretched, and very indifferent: the former when thinking of her past, the latter when thinking of the days to come. While she walked thus, unconscious

of the streets and their groups of other wayfarers, she saw Christopher emerge from a door not many paces in advance, and close it behind him : he stood for a moment on the step before descending into the road.

She could not, even had she wished it, easily check her progress without rendering the chance of his perceiving her still more certain. But she did not wish any such thing, and it made little difference, for he had already seen her in taking his survey round, and came down from the door to her side. It was impossible for anything formal to pass between them now.

‘ You are not at the concert, Mr. Julian ? ’ she said. ‘ I am glad to have a better opportunity of speaking to you, and of asking for your sister. Unfortunately there is not time for us to call upon her to-day.’

‘ Thank you, but it makes no difference,’ said Julian, with somewhat sad reserve. ‘ I will tell her I have met you ; she is away from home just at present.’ And finding that Ethelberta did not rejoin immediately, he observed, ‘ The chief organist, old Dr. Breeve, has taken my place at the concert, as it was arranged he should do after the opening part. I am now going to the Cathedral for the afternoon service. You are going there too ? ’

‘ I thought of looking at the interior for a moment.’

So they went on side by side, saying little ; for it was a situation in which scarcely any appropriate thing could be spoken. Ethelberta was the less reluctant to

walk in his company because of the provocation to skittishness that Lord Mountclere had given, a provocation which she still resented. But she was far from wishing to increase his jealousy; and yet this was what she was doing, Lord Mountclere being a perturbed witness from behind of all that was passing now.

They turned the corner of the short street of connection which led under an archway to the Cathedral Close, the old peer dogging them still. Christopher seemed to warm up a little, and repeated the invitation. 'You will come with your sister to see us before you leave?' he said. 'We have tea at six.'

'We shall have left for Melchester before that time. I am now only waiting for the train.'

'You two have not come all the way from Knollsea alone?'

'Part of the way,' said Ethelberta, evasively.

'And going back alone?'

'No. Only for the last five miles. At least that was the arrangement—I am not quite sure if it holds good.'

'You don't wish me to see you safely in the train?'

'It is not necessary: thank you very much. We are well used to getting about the world alone, and from Melchester to Knollsea is no serious journey, late or early . . . Yet I think I ought, in honesty, to tell you that we are not entirely by ourselves in Melchester to-day.'

‘I remember. I saw your friend—relative—in the room at the Town-hall. It did not occur to my mind for the moment that he was any other than a stranger standing there.’

‘He is not a relative,’ she said with perplexity. ‘I hardly know, Christopher, how to explain to you my position here to-day, because of some difficulties that have arisen since we have been in the town, which may alter it entirely. On that account I will be less frank with you than I should like to be, considering how long we have known each other. It would be wrong, however, if I were not to tell you that there has been a possibility of my marriage with him.’

‘The elderly gentleman?’

‘Yes. And I came here in his company, intending to return with him. But you shall know all soon. Picotee shall write to Faith.’

‘I always think the Cathedral looks better from this point than from the point usually chosen by artists,’ he said, with nervous quickness, directing her glance upwards to the silent structure, now misty and unrelieved by either high light or deep shade. ‘We get the grouping of the chapels and choir-aisles more clearly shown—and the whole culminates to a more perfect pyramid from this spot—do you think so?’

‘Yes. I do.’

A little further, and Christopher stopped to enter, when Ethelberta bade him farewell. ‘I thought at

one time that our futures might have been different from what they are apparently becoming,' he said then, regarding her as a stall-reader regards the brilliant book he cannot afford to buy. 'But one gets weary of repining about that. I wish Picotee and yourself could see us oftener; I am as confirmed a bachelor now as Faith is an old maid. I wonder if—should the event you contemplate occur—you and he will ever visit us, or we shall ever visit you!'

Christopher was evidently imagining the elderly gentleman to be some retired farmer, or professional man already so intermixed with the metamorphic classes of society as not to be surprised or inconvenienced by her beginnings: one who wished to secure Ethelberta as an ornament to his parlour fire in a quiet spirit, and in no intoxicated mood regardless of issues. She could scarcely reply to his supposition; and the parting was what might have been predicted from a conversation so carefully controlled.

Ethelberta, as she had intended, now went on further, and entering the nave began to inspect the sallow monuments which lined the grizzled pile. She did not perceive amid the shadows an old gentleman who had crept into the mouldy place as stealthily as a worm into a skull, and was keeping himself carefully beyond her observation. She continued to regard feature after feature till the choristers had filed in from the south side, and peals broke forth from the organ

on the black oaken mass at the junction of nave and choir, shaking every cobweb in the dusky vaults, and Ethelberta's heart no less. She knew the fingers that were pressing out those rolling sounds, and knowing them, became absorbed in tracing their progress. To go towards the organ-loft was an act of unconsciousness, and she did not pause till she stood almost beneath it.

Ethelberta was awakened from vague imaginings by the close approach of the old gentleman alluded to, who spoke with a great deal of agitation.

'I have been trying to meet with you,' said Lord Mountclere. 'Come, let us be friends again!—Ethelberta, I must not lose you. You cannot mean that the engagement shall be broken off?' He was far too desirous to possess her at any price now to run a second risk of exasperating her, and forbore to make any allusion to the recent pantomime between herself and Christopher that he had beheld, though it might reasonably have filled him with dread and petulance.

'I do not mean anything beyond this,' said she, 'that I entirely withdraw from it on the faintest sign that you have not abandoned such miserable jealous proceedings as those you adopted to-day.'

'I have quite abandoned them. Will you come a little further this way, and walk in the aisle? You do still agree to be mine?'

'If it gives you any pleasure, I do.'

‘Yes, yes. I implore that the marriage may be soon—very soon.’ The viscount spoke hastily, for the notes of the organ which were plunging into their ears ever and anon from the hands of his young rival seemed inconveniently and solemnly in the way of his suit.

‘Well, Lord Mountclere?’

‘Say in a few days?—it is the only thing that will satisfy me.’

‘I am absolutely indifferent as to the day. If it pleases you to have it early I am willing.’

‘Dare I ask that it may be this week?’ said the delighted old man.

‘I could not say that.’

‘But you can name the earliest day?’

‘I cannot now. We had better be going from here I think.’

The Cathedral was filling with shadows, and cold breathings came round the piers, for it was November, when night very soon succeeds noon where noon is sobered to the pallor of eve. But the service was not yet over, and before quite leaving the building Ethelberta cast one other glance towards the organ and thought of him behind it. At this moment her attention was arrested by the form of her sister Picotee, who came in at the north door, closed the lobby-wicket softly, and went lightly forward to the choir. When within a few yards of it she paused by a pillar, and lingered there looking up at the organ as Ethelberta

had done. No sound was coming from the ponderous mass of tubes just then; but in a short space a whole crowd of tones spread from the instrument to accompany the words of a response. Picotee started at the burst of music as if taken in a dishonest action, and moved on in a manner intended to efface the lover's loiter of the preceding moments from her own consciousness no less than from other people's eyes.

'Do you see that?' said Ethelberta. 'That little figure is my dearest sister. Could you but ensure a marriage between her and him she listens to, I would do anything you wish!'

'That is indeed a gracious promise,' said Lord Mountclere. 'And would you agree to what I asked just now?'

'Yes.'

'When?' A gleeful spark accompanied this.

'As you requested.'

'This week? The day after to-morrow?'

'If you will. But remember what lies on your side of the contract. I fancy I have given you a task beyond your powers.'

'Well, darling, we are at one at last,' said Lord Mountclere, rubbing his hand against his side. 'And if my task is heavy and I cannot guarantee the result, I can make it very probable. Marry me on Friday—the day after to-morrow, and I will do all that money and influence can effect to bring about their union.'

‘ You solemnly promise? You will never cease to give me all the aid in your power until the thing is done?’

‘ I do solemnly promise—on the conditions named.’

‘ Very good. You will have ensured my fulfilment of my promise before I can ensure yours; but I take your word.’

‘ You will marry me on Friday! Give me your hand upon it.’

She gave him her hand.

‘ It is a covenant?’ he asked.

‘ It is,’ said she.

Lord Mountclere warmed from surface to centre as if he had drunk of hippocras, and, after holding her hand for some moments, raised it gently to his lips.

‘ Two days—and you are mine,’ he said.

‘ That I believe I never shall be.’

‘ Never shall be? Why, darling?’

‘ I don’t know. Some catastrophe will prevent it. I shall be dead perhaps.’

‘ You distress me. Ah,—you meant me—you meant that I should be dead, because you think I am old! But that is a mistake—I am not very old.’

‘ I thought only of myself—nothing of you.’

‘ Yes, I know. Dearest, it is dismal and chilling here—let us go.’

Ethelberta mechanically moved with him, and felt there was no retreating now. In the meantime the

young ladykin whom the solemn vowing concerned had lingered round the choir screen, as if fearing to enter, yet loth to go away. The service terminated, the heavy books were closed, doors were opened, and the feet of the few persons who had attended evensong began pattering down the paved alleys. Not wishing Picotee to know that the object of her secret excursion had been discovered, Ethelberta now stepped out of the west doorway with the viscount before Picotee had emerged from the other; and they walked along the path together until she overtook them.

‘I fear it becomes necessary for me to stay in Melchester to-night,’ said Lord Mountclere. ‘I have a few matters to attend to here, as the result of our arrangements. But I will first accompany you as far as Anglebury, and see you safely into a carriage there that shall take you home. To-morrow I will drive to Knollsea, when we will make the final preparations.’

Ethelberta would not have him go so far and back again, merely to attend upon her; hence they parted at the railway, with due and correct tenderness; and when the train had gone, Lord Mountclere returned into the town on the special business he had mentioned, for which there remained only the present evening and the following morning, if he were to call upon her in the afternoon of the next day—the day before the wedding—now so recklessly hastened on his part, and so coolly assented to on hers.

By the time that the two young people had started it was nearly dark. Some portions of the railway stretched through little copses and plantations where, the leaf-shedding season being now at its height, red and golden patches of fallen foliage lay on either side of the rails; and as the travellers passed, all these death-stricken bodies boiled up in the whirlwind created by the velocity, and were sent flying right and left of them in myriads, a clean-fanned track being left behind.

Picotee was called from the observation of these phenomena by a remark from her sister: 'Picotee, the marriage is to be very early indeed. It is to be the day after to-morrow—if it can. Nevertheless I don't believe in the fact—I cannot.'

'Did you arrange it so? Nobody can make you marry so soon.'

'I agreed to the day,' murmured Ethelberta, languidly.

'How can it be? The gay dresses and the preparations and the people—how can they be collected in the time, Berta? And so much more of that will be required for a lord of the land than for a common man. Oh, I can't think it possible for a sister of mine to marry a lord.'

'And yet it has been possible any time this last month or two, strange as it seems to you. . . . It is to be not only a plain, and unlordly wedding, without

any lordly appliances, but a secret one—as secret as if I were some under-age heiress to an Indian fortune, and he a young man of nothing a year.’

‘Has Lord Mountclere said it must be so private? I suppose it is on account of his family.’

‘No. I say so; and it is on account of my family. Father might object to the wedding, I imagine, from what he once said, or he might be much disturbed about it; so I think it better that he and the rest should know nothing till all is over. You must dress again as my sister to-morrow, dear. Lord Mountclere is going to pay us an early visit to conclude necessary arrangements.’

‘Oh, the life as a lady at Lychworth Court! The flowers, the woods, the rooms, the pictures, the plate, and the jewels! Horses and carriages rattling and prancing, seneschals and pages, footmen hopping up and hopping down. It will be glory then!’

‘We might hire our father as one of my retainers, to increase it,’ said Ethelberta, drily.

Picotée’s countenance fell. ‘How shall we manage all about that? ’Tis terrible, really!’

‘The marriage granted, those things will right themselves by time and weight of circumstances. You take a wrong view in thinking of glories of that sort. My only hope is that my life will be quite private and simple, as will best become my inferiority and Lord Mountclere’s staidness. Such a splendid library as

there is at Lychworth, Picotee—quartos, folios, history, verse, Elzevirs, Caxtons—all that has been done in literature from Moses down to Scott—with such companions I can do without all other sorts of happiness.’

‘And you will not go to town from Easter to Lammas-tide, as other noble ladies do?’ asked the younger girl, rather disappointed at this aspect of a viscountess’s life.

‘I don’t know.’

‘But you will give dinners, and travel, and go to see his friends, and have them to see you?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Will you not be, then, as any other peeress; and shall not I be as any other peeress’s sister?’

‘That, too, I do not know. All is mystery. Nor do I even know that the marriage will take place. I feel that it may not; and perhaps so much the better, since the man is a stranger to me. I know nothing whatever of his nature, and he knows nothing of mine.’

CHAPTER XLII.

MELCHESTER—(*continued*).

THE commotion wrought in Julian's mind by the abrupt incursion of Ethelberta into his quiet sphere was thorough and protracted. The witchery of her presence he had grown strong enough to withstand in part; but her composed announcement that she had intended to marry another, and, as far as he could understand, was intending it still, added a new chill to the old shade of disappointment which custom was day by day enabling him to endure. The whole interval during which he had produced those diapason blasts, heard with such inharmonious feelings by the three auditors outside the screen, his thoughts had wandered wider than his notes in conjectures on the character and position of the gentleman seen in Ethelberta's company. Owing to his assumption that Lord Mountclere was but a stranger who had accidentally come in at the side door, Christopher had barely cast a glance upon him, and the wide difference between the years of the viscount and those of his betrothed was not so particularly observed as to raise

that point to an item in his objections now. Lord Mountclere was dressed with all the cunning that could be drawn from the metropolis by money and reiterated dissatisfaction; he prided himself on his upright carriage; his stick was so thin that the most malevolent could not insinuate that it was of any possible use in walking; his teeth had put on all the vigour and freshness of a second spring. Hence his look was the slowest of possible clocks in respect of his age, and his manner was equally as much in the rear of his appearance.

Christopher was now over five-and-twenty. He was getting so well accustomed to the spectacle of a world passing him by and splashing him with its wheels that he wondered why he had ever minded it. His habit of dreaming instead of doing had led him up to a curious discovery. It is no new thing for a man to fathom profundities by indulging humours: the active, the rapid, the people of such splendid momentum that before they can see where they are they have got elsewhere, have been surprised to behold what results attend the lives of those whose usual plan for discharging their active labours has been that of postponing them indefinitely. Certainly, the immediate result in the present case was, to all but himself, small and invisible; but it was of the nature of highest things. What he had learnt was that a woman who has once made a permanent impression

upon a man cannot altogether deny him her image by denying him her company, and that by sedulously cultivating the acquaintance of this Creature of Contemplation she becomes to him almost a living soul. Hence a sublimated Ethelberta accompanied him everywhere—one who never teased him, eluded him, or disappointed him: when he smiled she smiled, when he was sad she sorrowed. He may be said to have become the literal duplicate of that whimsical unknown rhapsodist who wrote of his own similar situation—

By absence this good means I gain,
 That I can catch her,
 Where none can watch her,
 In some close corner of my brain;
 There I embrace and kiss her;
 And so I both enjoy and miss her.

This frame of mind naturally induced an amazing abstraction in the organist, never very vigilant at the best of times. He would stand and look fixedly at a frog in a shady pool, and never once think of batrachians, or pause by a green bank to split some tall blade of grass into filaments without removing it from its stalk, passing on ignorant that he had made a cat-o'-nine-tails of a graceful slip of vegetation. He would hear the cathedral clock strike one, and go the next minute to see what time it was. 'I never seed such a man as Mr. Julian is,' said the head blower. 'He'll

meet me anywhere out-of-doors, and never wink or nod. You'd hardly expect it. I don't find fault, but you'd hardly expect it, seeing how I play the same instrument as he do himself, and have done it for so many years longer than he. How I have indulged that man, too! If 'tis Pedals for two martel hours of practice I never complain; and he has plenty of vagaries. When 'tis hot summer weather there's nothing will do for him but Choir, Great, and Swell altogether, till yer face is in a vapour; and on a frosty winter night he'll keep me there while he tweedles upon the Twelfth and Sixteenth till my arms be scrambled for want of motion. And never speak a word out of doors.' Somebody suggested that perhaps Christopher did not notice his coadjutor's presence in the street; and time proved to the organ-blower that the remark was just.

Whenever Christopher caught himself at these vacuous tricks he would be struck with admiration of Ethelberta's wisdom, foresight, and self-command in refusing to wed such an incapable man: he felt that he ought to be thankful that a bright memory of her was not also denied to him, and resolved to be content with it as a possession, since it was as much of her as he could decently maintain.

Wrapped thus in a humorous sadness he passed the afternoon under notice, and in the evening went home to Faith, who still lived with him, and showed

no sign of ever being likely to do otherwise. Their present place and mode of life suited her well. She revived at Melchester like an exotic sent home again. The leafy Close, the climbing buttresses, the pondering ecclesiastics, the great doors, the singular keys, the whispered talk, echoes of lonely footsteps, the sunset shadow of the tall steeple, reaching further into the town than the good bishop's teaching, and the general complexion of a spot where morning had the stillness of evening and spring some of the tones of autumn, formed a proper background to a person constituted as Faith, who, like Miss Hepzibah Pyncheon's chicken, possessed in miniature all the antiquity of her progenitors.

After tea Christopher went into the streets, as was frequently his custom, less to see how the world crept on there than to walk up and down for nothing at all. It had been market-day, and remnants of the rural population that had visited the town still lingered at corners, their toes hanging over the edge of the pavement, and their eyes wandering about the street.

The angle which formed the turning-point of Christopher's promenade was occupied by a jeweller's shop, of a standing which completely outshone every other shop in that or any trade throughout the town. Indeed, it was a staple subject of discussion in Melchester how a shop of such pretensions could find patronage sufficient to support its existence in a place

which, though well populated, was not fashionable. It had not long been established there, and was the enterprise of an incoming man whose whole course of procedure seemed to be dictated by an intention to astonish the native citizens very considerably before he had done. Nearly everything was glass in the frontage of this fairy mart, and its contents glittered like the hamochrysos stone. The panes being of plate-glass, and the shop having two fronts, a diagonal view could be had through it from one to the other of the streets to which it formed a corner.

This evening, as on all evenings, a flood of radiance spread from the window-lamps into the thick autumn air, so that from a distance that corner appeared as the glistening nucleus of all the light in the town. Towards it idle men and women unconsciously bent their steps, and closed in upon the panes like night-birds upon the lantern of a lighthouse.

When Christopher reached the spot there stood close to the pavement a plain close carriage, apparently waiting for some person who was purchasing inside. Christopher would hardly have noticed this had he not also perceived, pressed against the glass of the shop-window, an unusual number of local noses belonging to overgrown working lads, tosspots, an idiot, the ham-smoker's assistant with his sleeves rolled up, a scot-and-lot freeholder, three or four seamstresses, the young woman who brought home the washing, and so on.

The interest of these gazers in some proceedings within, which by reason of the gas-light were as public as if carried on in the open air, was very great.

‘Yes, that’s what he’s a buying o’—haw, haw!’ said one of the young men as the shopman removed from the window a gorgeous blue velvet tray of wedding-rings, and laid it on the counter.

‘’Tis what you may come to yerself, sooner or later, God have mercy upon ye; and as such no scoffing matter,’ said an older man. ‘Faith, I’d as lief cry as laugh to see a man in that corner.’

‘He’s a gent getting up in years too. He must hev been through it a few times afore, seemingly, to sit down and buy the tools so cool as that.’

‘Well, no. See what the shyest will do at such times. You bain’t yerself then; no man living is hisself then.’

‘True,’ said the ham-smoker’s man. ‘’Tis a thought to look at that a chap will take all this trouble to get a woman into his house, and a twelvemonth after would as soon hear it thunder as hear her sing!’

The policeman standing near was a humane man, through having a young family he could hardly keep; and he hesitated about telling them to move on. Christopher had before this time perceived that the articles were laid down before an old gentleman who was seated in the shop, and that the gentleman was none other than he who had been with Ethelberta in

the concert-room. The discovery was so startling that, constitutionally indisposed as he was to stand and watch, he became as glued to the spot as the other idlers. Finding himself now for the first time directly confronting the preliminaries of Ethelberta's marriage to a stranger, he was left with far less equanimity than he could have supposed possible to the situation.

'So near the time!' he said, and looked hard at Lord Mountclere.

Christopher had now a far better opportunity than before for observing Ethelberta's betrothed. Apart from any bias of jealousy, disappointment, or mortification, he was led to judge that this was not quite the man to make Ethelberta happy. He had fancied her companion to be a man under fifty; he was now visibly sixty or more. And it was not the sort of sexagenarianism beside which a young woman's happiness can sometimes contrive to keep itself alive in a quiet sleepy way. Suddenly it occurred to him that this was the man whom he had helped in the carriage accident on the way to Knollsea. He looked again.

By no means undignified, the face presented that combination of slyness and jocundity which we are accustomed to imagine of the canonical jolly-dogs in mediæval tales. The gamesome Curate of Meudon might have supplied some parts of the countenance; cunning Friar Tuck the remainder. Nothing but the viscount's constant habit of going to church every

Sunday morning when at his country residence kept unholiness out of his features—for though he lived theologically enough on the Sabbath, as it became a man in his position to do, he was strikingly mundane all the rest of the week, always preferring the devil to God in his oaths. And nothing but antecedent good-humour prevented the short fits of crossness incident to his passing infirmities from becoming established. His look was exceptionally jovial now, and the corners of his mouth twitched as the telegraph needles of a hundred little erotic messages from his heart to his brain. Anybody could see that he was a merry man still, who loved good company, warming drinks, nymph-like shapes, and pretty words, in spite of the disagreeable suggestions he received from the pupils of his eyes, and the joints of his lively limbs, that imps of mischief were busy sapping and mining in those regions with the view of tumbling him into a certain cool cellar under the church-aisle.

In general, if a lover can find any ground at all for serenity in the tide of an elderly rival's success, he finds it in the fact itself of that ancientness. The other side seems less a rival than a makeshift. But Christopher no longer felt this, and the significant signs before his eyes of the imminence of Ethelberta's union with this old hero filled him with restless dread. True, the gentleman, as he appeared illuminated by the jeweller's gas-jets, seemed more likely to injure Ethelberta by

indulgence than by severity, while her beauty lasted ; but there was a nameless something in him less tolerable than this.

The purchaser having completed his dealings with the goldsmith; was conducted to the door by the master of the shop, and into the carriage, which was at once driven off up the street.

Christopher now much desired to know the name of the man whom a nice chain of circumstantial evidence taught him to regard as the happy winner where scores had lost. He was grieved that Ethelberta's confessed reserve should have extended so far as to limit her to mere indefinite hints of marriage when they were talking almost on the brink of the wedding-day. That the ceremony was to be a private one—which it probably would be because of the disparity of ages—did not in his opinion justify her secrecy. He had shown himself capable of a transmutation as valuable as it is rare in men, the change from pestering lover to staunch friend, and this was all he had got for it. But even an old lover sunk to an indifferentist might have been tempted to spend an unoccupied half-hour in discovering particulars now, and Christopher had not lapsed nearly so far as to absolute unconcern.

That evening, however, nothing came in his way to enlighten him. But the next day, when skirting the Close on his ordinary duties, he saw the same carriage standing at a distance, and paused to behold the same

old gentleman come from a well-known office and re-enter the vehicle—Lord Mountclere, in fact, in earnest pursuit of the business of yesternight, having just pocketed a document in which romance, rashness, law, and gospel are so happily made to work together that it may safely be regarded as the neatest compromise which has ever been invented since Adam sinned.

This time Julian perceived that the brougham was one belonging to the Crown Hotel, which Lord Mountclere was using partly from the necessities of these hasty proceedings, and also because, by so doing, he escaped the notice that might have been bestowed upon his own equipage, or men-servants, the Mountclere hammer-cloths being known in Melchester. Christopher now walked towards the hotel, leisurely, yet with anxiety. He enquired of a porter what people were staying there that day, and was informed that they had only one person in the house, Lord Mountclere, whom sudden and unexpected business had detained in Melchester since the previous day.

Christopher lingered to hear no more. He retraced the street much more quickly than he had come; and he only said, ‘Lord Mountclere—it must never be!’

As soon as he entered the house, Faith perceived that he was greatly agitated. He at once told her of his discovery, and she exclaimed, ‘What a brilliant match!’

‘Oh, Faith,’ said Christopher, ‘you don’t know! You are far from knowing. It is as gloomy as midnight. Good God, can it be possible!’

Faith blinked in alarm, without speaking.

‘Did you never hear anything of Lord Mountclere when we lived at Sandbourne?’

‘I knew the name—no more.’

‘No, no—of course you did not. Well, though I never saw his face, to my knowledge, till a short time ago, I know enough to say that, if earnest representations can prevent it, this marriage shall not be. Father knew him, or about him, very well; and he once told me—what I cannot tell you. Fancy, I have seen him three times—yesterday, last night, and this morning—besides helping him on the road some weeks ago, and never once considered that he might be Lord Mountclere. He is here almost in disguise, one may say; neither man nor horse is with him; and his object accounts for his privacy. I see how it is—she is doing this to benefit her brothers and sisters, if possible; but she ought to know that if she is miserable they will never be happy. That’s the nature of women—they take the form for the essence, and that’s what she is doing now. I should think her guardian-angel must have quitted her when she agreed to a marriage which may tear her heart out like a claw.’

‘You are too warm about it, Kit—it cannot be so bad as that. It is not the thing, but the sensitiveness

to the thing, which is the true measure of its pain. Perhaps what seems so bad to you falls lightly on her mind. A campaigner in a heavy rain is not more uncomfortable than we are in a slight draught; and Ethelberta, fortified by her sapphires and gold cups and wax candles, will not mind facts which look like spectres to us outside. A title will turn troubles into romances, and she will shine as an interesting viscountess in spite of them.'

The discussion with Faith was not continued, Christopher stopping the argument by saying that he had a goodmind to go off at once to Knollsea, and show her her danger. But till the next morning Ethelberta was certainly safe; no marriage was possible anywhere before then. He passed the afternoon in a state of great indecision, constantly reiterating, 'I will go!'

CHAPTER XLIII.

WORKSHOPS—AN INN—THE STREET.

ON an extensive plot of ground, lying somewhere between the Thames and the Kensington squares, stood the premises of Messrs. Nockett and Perch, builders and contractors. The yard with its workshops formed part of one of those frontier lines between mangy business and garnished domesticity that occur in what are called improving neighbourhoods. We are accustomed to regard increase as the chief feature in a great city's progress, its well-known signs greeting our eyes on every outskirt. Slush-ponds may be seen turning into basement-kitchens; a broad causeway of shattered earthenware smothers plots of budding gooseberry-bushes and vegetable trenches, foundations following so closely upon gardens that the householder may be expected to find cadaverous sprouts from overlooked potatoes rising through the chinks of his cellar floor. But the other great process, that of internal transmutation, is not less curious than this encroachment of grey upon green. Its first erections are often only the milk-teeth of a

suburb, and as the district rises in dignity they are dislodged by those which are to endure. Slightness becomes supplanted by comparative solidity, commonness by novelty, lowness and irregularity by symmetry and height.

An observer of the precinct which has been named as an instance in point might have stood under a lamp-post and heard simultaneously the peal of the visitor's bell from the new terrace on the right hand, and the stroke of tools from the musty workshops on the left. Waggons laden with deals came up on this side, and landaus came down on the other—the former to lumber heavily through the old-established contractor's gates, the latter to sweep fashionably into the square.

About twelve o'clock on the day following Lord Mountclere's exhibition of himself to Christopher in the jeweller's shop at Melchester, and almost at the identical time when the viscount was seen to come from the office for marriage-licenses in the same place, a carriage drove nearly up to the gates of Messrs. Nockett and Co.'s yard. A gentleman stepped out and looked around. He was a man whose years would have been pronounced as five-and-forty by the friendly, fifty by the candid, fifty-two or three by the grim. He was as handsome a study in grey as could be seen in town, there being far more of the raven's plumage than of the gull's in the mixture as yet; and he had a glance of that practised sort which can measure people,

weigh them, repress them, encourage them to sprout and blossom as a March sun encourages crocuses, ask them questions, give them answers—in short, a glance that could do as many things as an American cooking-stove or a multum-in-parvo pocket-knife. But, as with most men of the world, this was mere mechanism : his actual emotions were kept so far within his person that they were rarely heard or seen near his features.

On reading the builders' names over the gateway he entered the yard, and asked at the office if Solomon Chickerel was engaged on the premises. The clerk was going to be very attentive, but finding the visitor had come only to speak to a workman, his tense attitude slackened a little, and he merely signified the foot of a Flemish ladder on the other side of the yard, saying, 'You will find him, sir, up there in the joiner's shop.'

When the man in the black coat reached the top he found himself at the end of a long apartment as large as a chapel and as low as a malt-room, across which ran parallel carpenters' benches to the number of twenty or more, a gangway being left at the side for access throughout. Behind every bench there stood a man or two, planing, fitting, or chiselling, as the case might be. The visitor paused for a moment, as if waiting for some cessation of their violent motions and uproar till he could make his errand known. He waited ten seconds, he waited twenty ; but, beyond that a quick look had been thrown upon him by every

pair of eyes, the muscular performances were in no way interrupted: everyone seemed oblivious of his presence, and absolutely regardless of his wish. In truth, the texture of that salmon-coloured skin could be seen to be aristocratic without a microscope, and the exceptional artisan has an off-hand way when contrasts are made painfully strong by an idler of this kind coming, gloved and brushed, into the very den where he is sweating and muddling in his shirt-sleeves.

The gentleman from the carriage then proceeded down the workshop, wading up to his knees in a sea of shavings, and bruising his ankles against corners of board and sawn-off blocks, that lay hidden like reefs beneath. At the ninth bench he made another venture.

‘Sol-Chickerel?’ said the man addressed, as he touched his plane-iron upon the oil-stone. ‘He’s one of them just behind.’

‘D—— it all, can’t one of you show me?’ the visitor angrily observed, for he had been used to more attention than this. ‘Here, point him out.’ He handed the man a shilling.

‘No trouble to do that,’ said the workman; and he turned and signified Sol by a nod without moving from his place.

The stranger entered Sol’s division, and, nailing him with his eye, said at once: ‘I want to speak a few words with you in private. Is not a Mrs. Petherwin your sister?’

Sol started suspiciously. 'Has anything happened to her?' he at length said, hurriedly.

'Oh no. It is on a business matter that I have called. You need not mind owning the relationship to me—the secret will be kept. I am the brother of one whom you may have heard of from her—Lord Mountclere.'

'I have not. But if you will wait a minute, sir—' He went to a little glazed box at the end of the shop, where the foreman was sitting, and, after speaking a few words to this person, Sol led Mountclere to the door, and down the ladder.

'I suppose we cannot very well talk here, after all?' said the gentleman when they reached the yard, and found several men moving about therein.

'Perhaps we had better go to some room—the nearest inn will answer the purpose, will it not?'

'Excellently.'

'There's the "Red Lion" over the way. They have a very nice private room upstairs.'

'Yes, that will do.' And passing out of the yard, the man with the glance entered the inn with Sol where they were shown to the parlour as requested.

While the waiter was gone for some wine, which Mountclere ordered, the more ingenuous of the two resumed the conversation by saying, awkwardly: 'Yes, Mrs. Petherwin is my sister, as you supposed, sir; but on her account I do not let it be known.'

‘Indeed,’ said Mountclere. ‘Well, I came to see you in order to speak of a matter which I thought you might know more about than I do, for it has taken me quite by surprise. My brother, Lord Mountclere, is, it seems, to be privately married to Mrs. Petherwin to-morrow.’

‘Is that really the fact?’ said Sol, becoming quite shaken. ‘I had no thought that such a thing could be possible!’

‘It is imminent.’

‘Father has told me that she has lately got to know some nobleman; but I never supposed there could be any meaning in that.’

‘You were altogether wrong,’ said Mountclere, leaning back in his chair and looking at Sol steadily. ‘Do you feel it to be a matter upon which you will congratulate her?’

‘A very different thing,’ said Sol, vehemently. ‘Though he is your brother, sir, I must say this, that I would rather she married the poorest man I know.’

‘Why?’

‘From what my father has told me of him, he is not—a more desirable brother-in-law to me than I shall be in all likelihood to him. What business has a man of that character to marry Berta, I should like to ask?’

‘That’s what I say,’ returned Mountclere, revealing his satisfaction at Sol’s estimate of his noble brother: it showed that he had calculated well in coming here.

‘My brother is getting old, and he has lived strangely: your sister is a highly respectable young lady.’

‘And he is not respectable, you mean? I know he is not. I worked near Lychworth once.’

‘I cannot say that,’ returned Mountclere. Possibly a certain fraternal feeling repressed a direct assent: and yet this was the only representation which could be expected to prejudice the young man against the wedding, if he were such an one as the visitor supposed Sol to be—a man vulgar in sentiment and ambition, but pure in his anxiety for his sister’s happiness. ‘At any rate, we are agreed in thinking that this would be an unfortunate marriage for both,’ added Mountclere.

‘About both I don’t know. It may be a good thing for him. When do you say it is to be, sir—to-morrow?’

‘Yes.’

‘I don’t know what to do!’ said Sol, walking up and down. ‘If half what I have heard is true, I would lose a winter’s work to prevent her marrying him. What does she want to go mixing in with people who despise her for? Now look here, Mr. Mountclere, since you have been and called me out to talk this over, it is only fair that you should tell me the exact truth about your brother. Is it a lie, or is it true, that he is not fit to be the husband of a decent woman?’

‘That is a curious enquiry,’ said Mountclere, whose manner and aspect, neutral as a winter landscape, had little in common with Sol’s warm and unrestrained

bearing. 'There are reasons why I think your sister will not be happy with him.'

'Then it is true what they say,' said Sol, bringing down his fist upon the table. 'I know your meaning well enough. What's to be done? If I could only see her this minute, she might be kept out of it.'

'You think your presence would influence your sister—if you could see her before the wedding?'

'I think it would. But who's to get at her?'

'I am going, so you had better come on with me—unless it would be best for your father to come.'

'Perhaps it might,' said the bewildered Sol. 'But he will not be able to get away; and it's no use for Dan to go. If anybody goes I must. If she has made up her mind, nothing can be done by writing to her.'

'I leave at once to see Lord Mountclere,' the other continued. 'I feel that as my brother is evidently ignorant of the position of Mrs. Petherwin's family and connections, it is only fair in me, as his nearest relative, to make them clear to him before it is too late.'

'You mean that if he knew her friends were working-people he would not think of her as a wife? 'Tis a reasonable thought. But make your mind easy: she has told him. I make a great mistake if she has for a moment thought of concealing that from him.'

'She may not have deliberately done so. But—and I say this with no ill-feeling—it is a matter known to few, and she may have taken no steps to undeceive

him. I hope to bring him to see the matter clearly. Unfortunately the thing has been so secret and hurried that there is barely time. I knew nothing until this morning—never dreamt of such a preposterous occurrence.'

'Preposterous! If it should come to pass, she would play her part as his lady as well as any other woman, and better. I wish there was no more reason for fear on my side than there is on yours. Things have come to a sore head when she is not considered lady enough for such as he. But perhaps your meaning is, that if your brother were to have a son, you would lose your heir-presumptive title to the cor'net of Mountclere? Well, 'twould be rather hard for ye, now I come to think o't—upon my life, 'twould.'

'The suggestion is as delicate as the —— atmosphere of this vile room. But let your ignorance be your excuse, my man. It is hardly worth while for us to quarrel when we both have the same object in view: do you think so?'

'That's true—that's true. When do you start, sir?'

'We must leave almost at once,' said Mountclere, looking at his watch. 'If we cannot catch the two o'clock train, there is no getting there to-night—and to-morrow we could not possibly arrive before one.'

'I wish there was time for me to go and tidy a bit,' said Sol, anxiously looking down at his working clothes.

‘I suppose you would not like me to go with you like this?’

‘Confound the clothes! If you cannot start in five minutes, we shall not be able to go at all.’

‘Very well, then—wait while I run across to the shop, then I am ready. How do we get to the station?’

‘My carriage is at the corner waiting. When you come out I will meet you at the gates.’

Sol then hurried downstairs, and, a minute or two later, Mr. Mountclere, looking like a man bent on policy at any price. The carriage was brought round by the time that Sol reappeared from the yard. He entered and sat down beside Mountclere, not without a sense that he was spoiling good upholstery: the coachman then allowed the lash of his whip to alight with the force of a small fly upon the horses, which set them up in an angry trot. Sol rolled on beside his new acquaintance with the shamefaced look of a man going to prison in a van, for pedestrians occasionally gazed at him, full of what seemed to himself to be ironical surprise.

‘I am afraid I ought to have changed my clothes after all,’ he said, writhing under a perception of the contrast between them. ‘Not knowing anything about this, I ain’t a bit prepared. If I had got even my second-best hat, it wouldn’t be so bad.’

‘It makes no difference,’ said Mountclere, inanimately.

‘Or I might have brought my portmantle with some things.’

‘It really is not important.’

On reaching the station they found there were yet a few minutes to spare, which Sol made use of in writing a note to his father, to explain what had occurred.

CHAPTER XLIV.

THE DONCASTLES' RESIDENCE ; AND OUTSIDE THE SAME.

MRS. DONCASTLE'S dressing-bell had rung, but Menlove, the lady's maid, having at the same time received a letter by the evening post, paused to read it before replying to the summons :—

‘ Lychworth Court, Wednesday.

‘ Darling Louisa,—I can assure you that I am no more likely than yourself to form another attachment. Far from it, indeed, as you will perceive by what follows. Before we left town I thought that to be able to see you occasionally was sufficient for happiness, but down in this lonely place the case is different. In short, my dear, I ask you to consent to a union with me as soon as you possibly can. Your prettiness has won my eyes and lips completely, sweet, and I lie awake at night to think of the golden curls you allowed to escape from their confinement on those nice times of private clothes, when we walked in the park and slipped the bonds of service, which you were never born to any more than I. . . .

‘Had not my own feelings been so strong, I should have told you at the first dash of my pen that what I expected is coming to pass at last—the old dog is going to be privately married to Mrs. P. Yes, indeed, and the wedding is coming off to-morrow, secret as the grave. All her friends will doubtless leave service on account of it. What he does now makes little difference to me, of course, as I had already given warning, but I shall stick to him like a Briton in spite of it. He has to-day made me a present, and a further five pounds for yourself, expecting you to hold your tongue on every matter connected with Mrs. P.’s friends, and to say nothing to any of them about this marriage until it is over. His lordship impressed this upon me very strong, and familiar as a brother, and of course we obey his instructions to the letter; for I need hardly say that unless he keeps his promise to help me in setting up the shop, our nuptials cannot be consumed. His help depends upon our obedience, as you are aware. . . .’

This, and much more, was from her very last lover, Lord Mountclere’s valet, who had been taken in hand directly she had convinced herself of Joey’s hopeless youthfulness. The missive sent Mrs. Menlove’s spirits soaring like spring larks; she flew upstairs in answer to the bell with a joyful, triumphant look, which the illuminated figure of Mrs. Doncastle in her dressing-

room could not quite repress. One could almost forgive Menlove her arts when so modest a result brought such vast content.

Mrs. Doncastle seemed inclined to make no remark during the dressing, and at last Menlove could repress herself no longer.

‘I should like to name something to you, m’m.’

‘Yes.’

‘I shall be wishing to leave soon, if it is convenient.’

‘Very well, Menlove,’ answered Mrs. Doncastle, as she serenely surveyed her right eyebrow in the glass.

‘Am I to take this as a formal notice?’

‘If you please; but I could stay a week or two beyond the month if suitable. I am going to be married—that’s what it is, m’m,’

‘Oh! I am glad to hear it, though I am sorry to lose you.’

‘It is Lord Mountclere’s valet—Mr. Tipman—m’m.’

‘Indeed.’

Menlove went on building up Mrs. Doncastle’s hair awhile in silence.

‘I suppose you heard the other news that arrived in town to-day, m’m?’ she said again. ‘Lord Mountclere is going to be married to-morrow.’

‘To-morrow? Are you quite sure?’

‘Oh yes, m’m. Mr. Tipman has just told me so in

his letter. He is going to be married to Mrs. Petherwin. It is to be quite a private wedding.'

Mrs. Doncastle made no remark, and she remained in the same still position as before ; but a countenance expressing transcendent surprise was reflected to Menlove by the glass.

At this sight Menlove's tongue so burned to go further, and unfold the lady's relations with the butler downstairs, that she would have lost a month's wages to be at liberty to do it. The disclosure was almost too magnificent to be repressed. To deny herself so exquisite an indulgence required an effort which nothing on earth could have sustained save the one thing that did sustain it—the knowledge that upon her silence hung the most enormous desideratum in the world, her own marriage. She said no more, and Mrs. Doncastle went away.

It was an ordinary family dinner that day, but their nephew Neigh happened to be present. Just as they were sitting down Mrs. Doncastle said to her husband: 'Why have you not told me of the wedding to-morrow?—or don't you know anything about it?'

'Wedding?' said Mr. Doncastle.

'Lord Mountclere is to be married to Mrs. Petherwin quite privately.'

'Good God!' said some person.

Mr. Doncastle did not speak the words ; they were not spoken by Neigh ; they seemed to float over the

room and round the walls, as if originating in some spiritualistic source. Yet Mrs. Doncastle, remembering the symptoms of attachment between Ethelberta and her nephew which had appeared during the summer, looked towards Neigh instantly, as if she thought the words must have come from him after all ; but Neigh's face was perfectly calm ; he, together with her husband, was sitting with his eyes fixed in the direction of the sideboard ; and turning to the same spot she beheld Chickerel standing pale as death, his lips being parted as if he did not know where he was.

‘Did you speak?’ said Mrs. Doncastle, looking with astonishment at the butler.

‘Chickerel, what's the matter—are you ill?’ said Mr. Doncastle, simultaneously. ‘Was it you who said that?’

‘I did, sir,’ said Chickerel, in a husky voice, scarcely above a whisper. ‘I could not help it.’

‘Why?’

‘She is my daughter, and it shall be known at once!’

‘Who is your daughter?’

He paused a few moments nervously. ‘Mrs. Petherwin,’ he said.

Upon this announcement Neigh looked at poor Chickerel as if he saw through him into the wall. Mrs. Doncastle uttered a faint exclamation and leant back in her chair : the bare possibility of the truth of Chickerel's claims to such paternity shook her to pieces

when she viewed her intimacies with Ethelberta during the past season—the court she had paid her, the arrangements she had entered into to please her; above all, the dinner-party which she had contrived and carried out solely to gratify Lord Mountclere and bring him into personal communication with the general favourite; thus making herself probably the chief though unconscious instrument in promoting a match by which her butler was to become father-in-law to a peer she delighted to honour. The crowd of perceptions almost took away her life; she closed her eyes in a white shiver.

‘Do you mean to say that the lady who sat here at dinner at the same time that Lord Mountclere was present, is your daughter?’ asked Doncastle.

‘Yes, sir,’ said Chickerel, respectfully.

‘How did she come to be your daughter?’

‘I—— Well, she is my daughter, sir.’

‘Did you educate her?’

‘Not altogether, sir. She was a very clever child. Lady Petherwin took a deal of trouble about her education. They were both left widows about the same time: the son died, then the father. My daughter was only seventeen then. But though she’s older now, her marriage with Lord Mountclere means misery. He ought to marry another woman.’

‘It is very extraordinary,’ Mr. Doncastle mur-

mured. 'If you are ill you had better go and rest yourself, Chickereel. Send in Thomas.'

Chickereel, who seemed to be much disturbed, then very gladly left the room, and dinner proceeded. But such was the peculiarity of the case, that, though there was in it neither murder, robbery, illness, accident, fire, or any other of the tragic and legitimate shakers of human nerves, two of the three who were gathered there sat through the meal without the least consciousness of what viands had composed it. Impressiveness depends as much upon propinquity as upon magnitude; and to have honoured unawares the daughter of the vilest Antipodean miscreant and murderer would have been less discomfiting to Mrs. Doncastle than it was to make the same blunder with the daughter of a respectable servant who happened to live in her own house. To Neigh the announcement was as the catastrophe of a story already begun, rather than as an isolated wonder. Ethelberta's words had prepared him for something, though the nature of that thing was unknown.

'Chickereel ought not to have kept us in ignorance of this—of course he ought not!' said Mrs. Doncastle, as soon as they were left alone.

'I don't see why not,' replied Mr. Doncastle, who took the matter very coolly, as was his custom.

'Then she herself should have let it be known.'

'Nor does that follow. You didn't tell Mrs.

Petherwin that your grandfather narrowly escaped hanging for shooting his rival in a duel.'

'Of course not. There was no reason why I should give extraneous information.'

'Nor was there any reason why she should. As for Chickereel, he doubtless felt how unbecoming it would be to make personal remarks upon one of your guests—Ha-ha-ha! Well, well—Ha-ha-ha-ha!'

'I know this,' said Mrs. Doncastle in great anger, 'that if my father had been in the room, I should not have let the fact pass unnoticed, and treated him like a stranger!'

'Would you have had her introduce Chickereel to us all round? My dear Margaret, it was a complicated position for a woman.'

'Then she ought not to have come.'

'There may be something in that, though she was dining out at other houses as good as ours. Well, I should have done just as she did, for the joke of the thing. Ha-ha-ha!—it is very good—very. ¶It was a case in which the appetite for a jest would overpower the sting of conscience in any well-constituted being—that, my dear, I must maintain.'

'I say she should not have come!' answered Mrs. Doncastle, firmly. 'Of course I shall dismiss Chickereel.'

'Of course you will do no such thing. I have never had a butler in the house before who suited me so well. It is a great credit to the man to have such a daughter,

and I am not sure that we do not derive some lustre of a humble kind from his presence in the house. But, seriously, I wonder at your short-sightedness, when you know the troubles we have had through getting new men from nobody knows where.'

Neigh, perceiving that the breeze in the atmosphere might ultimately intensify to a palpable black squall, seemed to think it would be well to take leave of his uncle and aunt as soon as he conveniently could; nevertheless, he was much less discomposed by the situation than by the active cause which had led to it. When Mrs. Doncastle arose, her husband said he was going to speak to Chickerel for a minute or two, and Neigh followed his aunt upstairs.

Presently Doncastle joined them. 'I have been talking to Chickerel,' he said. 'It is a very curious affair—this marriage of his daughter and Lord Mountclere. The whole situation is the most astounding I have ever met with. The man is quite ill about the news. He has shown me a letter which has just reached him from his son on the same subject. Lord Mountclere's brother and this young man have actually gone off together to try to prevent the wedding, and Chickerel has asked to be allowed to go himself, if he can get soon enough to the station to catch the night mail. Of course he may go if he wishes.'

'What a funny thing!' said the lady, with a wretchedly factitious smile. 'The times have taken a strange

turn when the angry parent of the comedy, who goes post-haste to prevent the undutiful daughter's rash marriage, is a gentleman from below stairs, and the unworthy lover a peer of the realm !'

Neigh spoke for almost the first time. 'I don't blame Chickerel in objecting to Lord Mountclere. I should object to him myself if I had a daughter. I never liked him.'

'Why?' said Mrs. Doncastle, lifting her eyelids as if the act were a heavy task.

'For reasons which don't generally appear.'

'Yes,' said Mr. Doncastle in a low tone. 'Still we must not believe all we hear.'

'Is Chickerel going?' said Neigh.

'He leaves in five or ten minutes,' said Doncastle.

After a few further words Neigh mentioned that he was unable to stay longer that evening, and left them. When he had reached the outside of the door he walked a little way up the pavement and back again, as if reluctant to lose sight of the street, finally standing under a lamp-post whence he could command a view of Mr. Doncastle's front. Presently a man came out in a great-coat and with a small bag in his hand; Neigh at once recognising the person as Chickerel, went up to him.

'Mr. Doncastle tells me you are going on a sudden journey. At what time does your train leave?' Neigh asked.

‘I go by the ten o’clock, sir : I hope it is a third-class,’ said Chickereel ; ‘ though I am afraid it may not be.’

‘ It is as much as you will do to get to the station,’ said Neigh, turning the face of his watch to the light. ‘ Here, come into my cab—I am driving that way.’

‘ Thank you, sir,’ said Chickereel.

Neigh called a cab at the first opportunity, and they entered and drove along together. Neither spoke during the journey. When they were driving up to the station entrance Neigh looked again to see the hour.

‘ You have not a minute to lose,’ he said, in repressed anxiety. ‘ And your journey will be expensive : instead of walking from Anglebury to Knollsea, you had better drive—above all, don’t lose time. Take this from me, since the emergency is great.’ He handed something to Chickereel folded up small.

The butler took it without enquiry, and stepped out hastily.

‘ I sincerely hope she—— Well, good-night, Chickereel,’ continued Neigh, ending his words abruptly. The cab containing him drove again towards the station-gates, leaving Chickereel standing on the kerb.

He passed through the booking-office, and looked at the paper Neigh had put into his hand. It was a five-pound note.

Chickereel mused on the circumstance as he took his ticket and got into the train.

CHAPTER XLV.

THE RAILWAY—THE SEA—THE SHORE BEYOND.

By this time Sol and the Honourable Edgar Mountclere had gone far on their journey into Wessex. Lychworth Court, Mountclere's destination, though several miles from Knollsea, was most easily accessible by the same route as that to the village, the latter being the place for which Sol was bound. From the few words that passed between them on the way, Mountclere became more stubborn than ever in a belief that this was a carefully laid trap of the fair Ethelberta's to ensnare his brother without revealing to him her family ties, which it therefore behoved him to make clear with the utmost force of representation before the fatal union had been contracted. Being himself the viscount's only remaining brother and near relative, the disinterestedness of his motives may be left to imagination; that there was much real excuse for his conduct must, however, be borne in mind. Whether his attempt would prevent the union was another question: he believed that, conjoined with his personal influence over the viscount,

and the importation of Sol as a firebrand to throw between the betrothed pair, it might do so.

About half an hour before sunset the two individuals, linked by their differences, reached the point of railway at which the branch to Sandbourne left the main line. They had taken tickets for Sandbourne, intending to go thence to Knollsea by the steamer that plied between the two places during the summer months—making this a short and direct route. But it occurred to Mountclere on the way that, summer being over, the steamer might possibly have left off running, the wind might be too high for a small boat, and no large one might be at hand for hire: therefore it would be safer to go by train to Anglebury, and the remaining sixteen miles by driving over the hills, even at a great loss of time.

Accident, however, determined otherwise. They were in the station at the junction, enquiring of an official if the 'Speedwell' had ceased to run, when a countryman who had just come up from Sandbourne stated that, though the 'Speedwell' had left off for the year, there was that day another steamer at Sandbourne. This steamer would of necessity return to Knollsea that evening, partly because several people from that place had been on board, and also because the Knollsea folk were waiting for groceries and draperies from London: there was not an ounce of tea or a hundred-weight of coal in the village, owing

to the recent winds, which had detained the provision parcels at Sandbourne, and kept the colliers up Channel until the change of weather this day. To introduce necessaries by a roundabout land journey was not easy when they had been ordered by the other and habitual route. The boat returned at six o'clock.

So on they went to Sandbourne, driving off to the pier directly they reached that place, for it was getting towards night. The steamer was there, as the man had told them, much to the relief of Sol, who, being extremely anxious to enter Knollsea before a late hour, had known that this was the only way in which it could be done.

Some unforeseen incident delayed the boat, and they walked up and down the pier to wait. The prospect was gloomy enough. The wind was north-east; the sea along shore was a chalky-green, though comparatively calm, this part of the coast forming a shelter from wind in its present quarter. The clouds had different velocities, and some of them shone with a coppery glare, produced by rays from the west which did not enter the inferior atmosphere at all. It was reflected on the distant waves in patches, with an effect as if the waters were at those particular spots stained with blood. This departed, and what daylight was left to the earth came from strange and unusual quarters of the heavens. The zenith would be bright, as if that were the place of the sun; then all overhead

would close, and a whiteness in the east would give the appearance of morning; while a bank as thick as a wall barricaded the west, which looked as if it had no acquaintance with sunsets and would blush red no more.

‘Any other passengers?’ shouted the master of the steamboat. ‘We must be off: it may be a dirty night.’

Sol and Mountclere went on board, and the pier receded in the dusk.

‘Shall we have any difficulty in getting into Knollsea Bay?’ said Mountclere.

‘Not if the wind keeps where it is for another hour or two.’

‘I fancy it is shifting to the east’ard,’ said Sol.

The captain looked as if he had thought the same thing.

‘I hope I shall be able to get home to-night,’ said a Knollsea woman. ‘My little children be left alone. Your mis’ess is in a bad way, too—isn’t she, skipper?’

‘Yes.’

‘And you’ve got the doctor from Sandbourne aboard, to tend her?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then you’ll be sure to put into Knollsea, if you can?’

‘Yes. Don’t be alarmed, ma’am. We’ll do what we can. But no one must boast.’

The skipper's remark was the result of an observation that the wind had at last blown to the east, the single point of the compass whence it could affect Knollsea Bay. The result of this change was soon perceptible. About midway in their transit the land elbowed out to a bold chalk promontory ; beyond this stretched a vertical wall of the same cliff, in a line parallel with their course. In fair weather it was possible and customary to steer close along under this hoary façade for the distance of a mile, there being six fathoms of water within a few boats' lengths of the precipice. But it was an ugly spot at the best of times, landward no less than seaward, the cliff rounding off at the top in vegetation, like a forehead with low-grown hair, no defined edge being provided as a warning to unwary pedestrians on the downs above.

As the wind sprang up stronger, white clots could be discerned at the water level, rising and falling against the black band of shaggy weed that formed a sort of skirting to the base of the wall. They were the first-fruits of the new east blast, which shaved the face of the cliff like a razor—gatherings of foam in the shape of heads, shoulders, and arms of snowy whiteness, apparently struggling to rise from the deeps, and ever sinking back to their old levels again. They reminded an observer of a drowning scene in a picture of the Deluge. At some points the face of rock was hollowed into gaping caverns, and the water began to

thunder into these with a leap that was only topped by the rebound seaward again. The vessel's head was kept a little further to sea, but beyond that everything went on as usual.

The precipice was still in view, and before it several huge columns of rock appeared, detached from the mass behind. Two of these were particularly noticeable in the grey air—one vertical, stout and square; the other slender and tapering. They were individualised as husband and wife by the coast men. The waves leapt up their sides like a pack of hounds; this, however, though fearful in its boisterousness, was nothing to the terrible games that sometimes went on round the knees of those giants in stone. Yet it was sufficient to cause the course of the frail steamboat to be altered yet a little more—from south-west-by-south to south-by-west—to give the breakers a still wider berth.

‘I wish we had gone by land, sir; ’twould have been surer play,’ said Sol to Mountclere, a cat-and-dog friendship having arisen between them.

‘Yes,’ said Mountclere. ‘Knollsea is an abominable place to get into with an east wind blowing, they say.’

Another circumstance conspired to make their landing more difficult, which Mountclere knew nothing of. With the wind easterly, the highest sea prevailed in Knollsea Bay from the slackening of flood-tide to the

first hour of ebb. At that time the water outside stood without a current, and ridges and hollows chased each other towards the beach unchecked. When the tide was setting strong up or down Channel its flow across the mouth of the bay thrust aside, to some extent, the landward plunge of the waves.

We glance for a moment at the state of affairs on the land they were nearing.

This was the time of year to know the truth about the inner nature and character of Knollsea; for to see Knollsea with its summer smile on was to see a courtier before a king; Knollsea was not to be known by such simple means. The half-dozen detached villas used as lodging-houses in the summer, standing aloof from the cots of the permanent race, rose in the dusk of this gusty evening, empty, silent, damp, and dark as tombs. The gravel walks leading to them were invaded by leaves and tufts of grass. As the darkness thickened the wind increased, and each blast raked the iron railings before the houses till they hummed as if in a song of derision. Certainly it seemed absurd at this time of year that human beings should expect comfort in a spot capable of such moods as these.

However, one of the houses looked cheerful, and that was the dwelling to which Ethelberta had gone. Its gay external colours might as well have been black for anything that could be seen of them now, but an unblinded window revealed inside it a room bright and

warm. It was illuminated by firelight only. Within, Ethelberta appeared against the curtains, close to the glass. She was watching through a binocular a faint light which had become visible in the direction of the bluff far away over the bay.

‘Here is the “Spruce” at last, I think,’ she said to her sister, who was by the fire. ‘I hope they will be able to land the things I have ordered. They are on board I know.’

The wind continued to rise till at length something from the lungs of the gale alighted like a feather upon the pane, and remained there sticking. Seeing the substance, Ethelberta opened the window to secure it. The fire roared and the pictures kicked the walls; she closed the sash, and brought to the light a crisp fragment of foam.

‘How suddenly the sea must have risen,’ said Picotee.

The servant entered the room. ‘Please, mis’ess says she is afraid you won’t have your things to-night, ’m. They say the steamer can’t land, and mis’ess wants to know if she can do anything?’

‘It is of no consequence,’ said Ethelberta. ‘They will come some time, unless they go to the bottom.’

The girl left the room. ‘Shall we go down to the shore and see what the night is like?’ said Ethelberta. ‘This is the last opportunity I shall have.’

‘Is it right for us to go, considering you are to be

married to-morrow?' said Picotee, who had small affection for nature in this mood.

Her sister laughed. 'Let us put on our cloaks—nobody will know us. I am sorry to leave this grim and primitive place, even for Lychworth Court.'

They wrapped themselves up, and descended the hill.

On drawing near the battling line of breakers which marked the meeting of sea and land they could perceive within the nearly invisible horizon an equilateral triangle of lights. It was formed of three stars, a red on the one side, a green on the other, and a white on the summit. This, composed of mast-head and side lamps, was all that was visible of the 'Spruce,' which now faced end-on about half a mile distant, and was still nearing the pier. The girls went farther, and stood on the foreshore, listening to the din. Seaward appeared nothing distinct save a black horizontal band embodying itself out of the grey water, strengthening its blackness, and enlarging till it looked like a nearing wall. It was the concave face of a coming wave. On its summit a white edging arose with the aspect of a lace frill; it broadened, and fell over the front with a terrible concussion. Then all before them was a sheet of whiteness, which spread with amazing rapidity, till they found themselves standing in the midst of it, as in a field of snow. Both felt a cold chill encircling their ankles, and they rapidly ran up the beach.



GRAHAM

ALL BEFORE THEM WAS A SHEET OF WHITENESS.

‘ You girls, come away there, or you’ll be washed off: what need have ye for going so near?’

Ethelberta recognised the stentorian voice as that of Captain Flower, who, with a party of boatmen, was discovered to be standing near, under the shelter of a wall. He did not know them in the gloom, and they took care that he should not. They retreated farther up the beach, when the hissing fleece of froth slid again down the shingle, dragging the pebbles under it with a rattle as of a beast gnawing bones.

The spot whereon the men stood was called ‘Down-under-wall;’ it was a nook commanding a full view of the bay, and hither the nautical portion of the village unconsciously gravitated on windy afternoons and nights, to discuss past disasters in the reticent spirit induced by a sense that they might at any moment be repeated. The stranger who should walk the shore on roaring and sobbing November eves when there was not light sufficient to guide his footsteps, and muse on the absoluteness of the solitude, would be surprised by a smart ‘Good-night’ being returned from this corner in company with the echo of his tread. In summer the six or eight perennial figures stood on the breezy side of the wall—in winter and in rain to leeward; but no weather was known to dislodge them.

‘I had no sooner come ashore than the wind began to fly round,’ said the previous speaker; ‘and it must have been about the time they were off St. Lucas’s.

“She’ll put back for certain,” I said; and I had no more thought o’ seeing her than John’s set-net that was carried round the point o’Monday.’

‘Poor feller: his wife being in such a state makes him anxious to land if ’acan: that’s what ’tis, plain enough.’

‘Why that?’ said Flower.

‘The doctor’s aboard, ’a believe: “I’ll have the most understanding man in Sandbourne, cost me little or much,” he said.’

‘She’s better,’ said the other. ‘I called half an hour afore dark.’

Flower, being an experienced man, knew how the judgment of a ship’s master was liable to be warped by family anxieties, many instances of the same having occurred in the history of navigation. He felt uneasy, for he knew the deceit and guile of this bay far better than did the master of the ‘Spruce,’ who, till within a few recent months, had been a stranger to the place. Indeed, it was the bay which had made Flower what he was, instead of a man in thriving retirement. The two great ventures of his life had been blown ashore and broken up within that very semicircle. The sturdy sailor now stood with his eyes fixed on the triangle of lights which showed that the steamer had not relinquished her intention of bringing up inside the pier if possible; his right hand was in his pocket, where it played with a large key which lay there. It was the

key of the life-boat shed, and Flower was coxswain. His musing was on the possibility of a use for it this night.

It appeared that the captain of the 'Spruce' was aiming to pass in under the lee of the pier; but a strong current of four or five knots was running between the piles, drifting the steamer away at every attempt as soon as the engine was stopped. To come in on the other side was dangerous, the hull of the vessel being likely to crash against and overthrow the fragile erection, with damage to herself also. Flower, who had disappeared for a few minutes, now came back.

'It is just possible I can make 'em hear with the trumpet, now they be to leeward,' he said, and proceeded with two or three others to grope his way out upon the pier, which consisted simply of a row of rotten piles covered with rotten planking, no balustrade of any kind existing to keep the unwary from tumbling off. At the water level the piles were eaten away by the action of the sea to about the size of a man's wrist, and at every fresh influx the whole structure trembled like a spider's web. In this lay the danger of making fast, for a strong pull from a headfast rope might drag the erection completely over. Flower arrived at the end, where a lantern hung.

"'Spruce' ahoy!" he blared through the speaking trumpet two or three times.

There seemed to be a reply of some sort from the steamer.

‘Tuesday’s gale hev loosened the pier, Cap’n Ounce; the bollards be too weak to make fast to: must land in boats if ye will land, but dangerous; yer wife is out of danger, and ’tis a boy-y-y-y!’

Ethelberta and Picotee were at this time standing on the beach a hundred and fifty yards off. Whether or not the master of the steamer received the information volunteered by Flower, the two girls saw the triangle of lamps get narrow at its base, reduce themselves to two in a vertical line, then to one, then to darkness. The ‘Spruce’ had turned her head from Knollsea.

‘They have gone back, and I shall not have my things after all!’ said Ethelberta. ‘Well, I must do without them.’

‘You see, ’twas best to play sure,’ said Flower to his comrades, in a tone of complacency. ‘They might have been able to do it, but ’twas risky. The shop-folk be out of stock, I hear, and the visiting lady up the hill is terribly in want of clothes, so ’tis said. But what’s that? Ounce ought to have put back afore.’

Then the lantern which hung at the end of the jetty was taken down, and the darkness enfolded everything from view. The bay became nothing but a voice, the foam an occasional touch upon the face, the ‘Spruce’ an imagination, the pier a memory. Everything ceased upon the senses but one; that was the

wind. It mauled their persons like a hand, and caused every scrap of their raiment to tug westward. To stand with the face to sea brought semi-suffocation, from the intense pressure of air.

The boatmen retired to their position under the wall, to lounge again in silence. Conversation was not considered necessary: their sense of each other's presence formed a kind of conversation. Meanwhile Picotee and Ethelberta went up the hill.

'If your wedding were going to be a public one, what a misfortune this delay of the packages would be,' said Picotee.

'Yes,' replied the elder.

'I think the bracelet the prettiest of all the presents he brought to-day—do you?'

'It is the most valuable.'

'Lord Mountclere is very kind, is he not? I like him a great deal better than I did—do you, Berta?'

'Yes, very much better,' said Ethelberta, warming a little. 'If he were not so suspicious at odd moments I should like him exceedingly. But I must cure him of that by a regular course of treatment, and then he'll be very nice.'

'For an old man. He likes you better than any young man would take the trouble to do. I wish somebody else were old too.'

'He will be some day.'

'Yes, but——'

‘Never mind: time will straighten many crooked things.’

‘Do you think Lord Mountclere has reached home by this time?’

‘I should think so: though I believe he had to call at the parsonage before leaving Knollsea.’

‘Had he? What for?’

‘Why, of course somebody must——’

‘Oh, yes. Do you think anybody in Knollsea knows it is going to be except us and the parson?’

‘I suppose the clerk knows.’

‘I wonder if a peer has ever been married so privately before.’

‘Frequently: when he marries far beneath him, as in this case. But even if I could have had it, I should not have liked a showy wedding. I have had no experience as a bride except in the private form of the ceremony.’

‘Berta, I am sometimes uneasy about you even now, and I want to ask you one thing, if I may. Are you doing this for my sake? Would you have married Mr. Julian if it had not been for me?’

‘It is difficult to say exactly. It is possible that if I had had no relations at all, I might have married him. And I might not.’

‘I don’t intend to marry.’

‘In that case you will live with me at Lychworth. However, we will leave such details till the ground-

work is confirmed. When we get indoors will you see if the boxes have been properly corded, and are quite ready to be sent for? Then come in and sit by the fire, and I'll sing some songs to you.'

'Sad ones, you mean.'

'No, then: they shall not be sad.'

'Perhaps they may be the last you will ever sing to me.'

'They may be. Such a thing has occurred.'

'But we will not think so. We'll suppose you are to sing many to me yet.'

'Yes. There's good sense in that, Picotee. In a world where the blind only are cheerful we should all do well to put out our eyes. There, I did not mean to get into this state: forgive me, Picotee. It is because I have had a thought—why I cannot tell—that as much as this man brings to me in rank and gifts he may take out of me in tears.'

'Berta!'

'But there's no reason in it—not any; for not in a single matter does what has been supply us with any certain ground for knowing what will be in the world. I have seen marriages where happiness might have been said to be ensured, and they have been all sadness afterwards; and I have seen those in which the prospect was black as night, and they have led on to a time of sweetness and comfort. And I have seen marriages neither joyful nor sorry, that have become either as

accident forced them to become, the persons having no voice in it at all. Well, then, why should I be afraid to make a plunge when chance is as trustworthy as calculation?’

‘If you don’t like him well enough, don’t have him, Berta. There’s time enough to put it off even now.’

‘Oh, no. I would not upset a well-considered course on the haste of an impulse. Our will should withstand our misgivings. Now let us see if all has been packed, and then we’ll sing.’

That evening, while the wind was wheeling round and round the dwelling, and the calm eye of the lighthouse afar was the single speck perceptible of the outside world from the door of Ethelberta’s temporary home, the music of songs mingled with the stroke of the wind across the iron railings, and was swept on in the general tide of the gale, and the noise of the rolling sea, till not the echo of a tone remained.

An hour before this singing, an old gentleman might have been seen to alight from a little one-horse brougham, and enter the door of Knollsea parsonage. He was bent upon obtaining an entrance to the vicar’s study without giving his name.

But it happened that the vicar’s wife was sitting in the front room, making a pillow-case for the children’s bed out of an old surplice which had been excommunicated the previous Easter; she heard the new-comer’s voice through the partition, started, and went quickly

to her husband, who was, where he ought to have been, in his study. At her entry he looked up with an abstracted gaze, having been lost in meditation over a little schooner which he was attempting to rig for their youngest boy. At a word from his wife on the suspected name of the visitor, he resumed his earlier occupation of inserting a few strong sentences, full of the observation of maturer life, between the lines of a sermon written during his first years of ordination, in order to make it available for the coming Sunday. His wife then vanished with the little ship in her hand, and the visitor appeared. A talk went on in low tones.

After a ten minutes' stay he departed as secretly as he had come. His errand was the cause of much whispered discussion between the vicar and his wife during the evening, but nothing was said concerning it to the outside world.

CHAPTER XLVI.

SANDBOURNE—A LONELY HEATH—THE ‘OLD FOX’—THE
HIGHWAY.

It was half-past eleven before the ‘Spruce,’ with Mountclere and Sol Chickerel on board, had steamed back again to Sandbourne. The direction and increase of the wind had made it necessary to keep the vessel still further to sea on their return than in going, that they might clear without risk the windy, sousing, thwacking, basting, scourging Jack Ketch of a corner called St. Lucas’ Leap, which lay about halfway along their track, and stood, with its detached posts and stumps of white rock, like a skeleton’s lower jaw, grinning at rash navigation. Here strong currents and cross currents were beginning to interweave their scrolls and meshes, the water rising behind them in tumultuous heaps, and slamming against the fronts and angles of cliff, whence it flew into the air like clouds of flour. Who could now believe that this roaring abode of chaos smiled in the sun as gently as an infant during the summer days not long gone by, every pinnacle, crag, and cave returning a doubled image across the glassy sea?

They were now again at Sandbourne, a point in their journey reached more than four hours ago. It became necessary to consider anew how to accomplish the difficult remainder. The wind was not blowing much beyond what seamen call half a gale, but there had been enough unpleasantness afloat to make landsmen glad to get ashore, and this dissipated in a slight measure their vexation at having failed in their purpose. Still, Mountclere loudly cursed their confidence in that treacherously short route, and Sol abused the unknown Sandbourne man who had brought the news of the steamer's arrival to them at the junction. The only course left open to them now, short of giving up the undertaking, was to go by the road along the shore, which, curving round the various little creeks and inland seas between their present position and Knollsea, was of no less length than forty miles. There was no train back to the junction till the next morning, and Sol's proposition that they should drive thither in hope of meeting the mail-train, was overruled by Mountclere.

'We will have nothing more to do with chance,' he said. 'We may miss the train, and then we shall have gone out of the way for nothing. More than that, the down mail does not stop till it gets several miles beyond the nearest station for Knollsea; so it is hopeless.'

‘If there had only been a telegraph to the confounded place!’

‘Telegraph—we might as well telegraph to the devil as to an old booby and a d—— scheming young ——. I very much question if we shall do anything in the matter, even if we get there. But I suppose we had better go on now.’

‘You can do as you like. I shall go on, if I have to walk every step o’t.’

‘That’s not necessary. I think the best posting-house at this end of the town is Tempett’s—we must knock them up at once. Which will you do—attempt supper here, or break the back of our journey first, and get on to Anglebury? We may rest an hour or two there, unless you feel really in want of a meal.’

‘No. I’ll leave eating to merrier men, who have no sister in the hands of a d—— old Philistine.’

‘Very well,’ said Mountclere. ‘We’ll go on at once.’

An additional half-hour elapsed before they were fairly started, the lateness and abruptness of their arrival causing delay in getting a conveyance ready: the tempestuous night had apparently driven the whole town, gentle and simple, early to their beds. And when at length the travellers were on their way the aspect of the weather grew yet more forbidding. The rain came down unmercifully, the booming wind caught it, bore it across the plain, whizzed it against

the carriage like a sower sowing his seed. It was precisely such weather, and almost at the same season, as when Picotee traversed the same moor stricken with her great disappointment at not meeting Christopher Julian.

Farther on for several miles the drive lay through an open heath, dotted occasionally with fir plantations, the trees of which told the tale of their species without help from outline or colour ; they spoke in those melancholy moans and sobs which give to their sound a solemn sadness surpassing even that of the sea. From each carriage-lamp the long rays stretched like feelers into the air, and somewhat cheered the way, until the insidious damp that pervaded all things above, around, and underneath, overpowered one of them, and rendered every attempt to rekindle it ineffectual. Even had the two men's dislike to each other's society been less, the general din of the night would have prevented much talking ; as it was, they sat in a rigid reticence that was almost a third personality. The roads were laid hereabouts with a light sandy gravel, which, though not clogging, was soft and friable. It speedily became saturated, and the wheels ground heavily and deeply into its substance.

At length, after overpassing from fifteen to twenty miles of these eternal heaths under the eternally drumming storm, they could discern eyelets of light winking to them out of the distance from under a nebulous

brow of pale haze. They were looking on the little town of Flatmouth. Soon after this cross-roads were reached, one of which, at right angles to their present direction, led down on the left to that place. Here the man stopped, and informed them that the horses would be able to go but a mile or two farther.

‘Very well, we must have others that can,’ said Mountclere. ‘Does our way lie through the town?’

‘No sir—unless we go there to change horses, which I thought you would wish to do. The direct road is straight on. Flatmouth lies about three miles down there on the left. If we keep straight on, we shall come to no place for six or seven miles, and then only to Bullton.’

‘What’s Bullton like?’

‘A trumpery small bit of a village.’

‘Still, I think we had better push on,’ said Sol. ‘I am against going so far out of our way to get into Flatmouth.’

‘So am I,’ returned Mountclere.

‘I know a wheelwright in Bullton,’ continued Sol, ‘and he keeps a beer-house, and owns two horses. We could hire them, and have a bit of sommat in the shape of victuals, and then get on to Anglebury. Perhaps the rain may hold up by that time. Anything’s better than going out of our way.’

‘Yes. And the horses can last out to that place,’ said Mountclere. ‘Up and on again, my man.’

On they went towards Bullton. Still the everlasting heath, the black hills bulging against the sky, the barrows upon their round summits like warts on a swarthy skin. The storm blew huskily over bushes of heather and furze that it was unable materially to disturb, and the travellers proceeded as before. But the horses were now far from fresh, and the time spent in reaching the next village was quite half as long as that taken up by the previous heavy portion of the drive. When they entered Bullton it was about three.

‘Now, where’s the inn?’ said Mountclere, yawning.

‘Just on the knap,’ Sol answered. ‘’Tis a little small place, and we must do as well as we can.’

They pulled up before a cottage, upon the white-washed front of which could be seen a square board representing the sign. After an infinite labour of rapping and shouting, a casement opened overhead, and a woman’s voice enquired what was the matter. Sol explained, when she told them that the horses were away from home.

‘Now we must wait till these are rested!’ growled Mountclere. ‘A pretty muddle!’

‘It cannot be helped,’ answered Sol; and he asked the woman to open the door. She replied that her husband was away with the horses and van, and that they could not come in.

Sol was known to her, and he mentioned his name; but the woman only began to abuse him.

‘Come, publican, you’d better let us in, or we’ll have the law for’t,’ rejoined Sol, with more spirit. ‘You don’t dare to keep nobility waiting like this.’

‘Nobility!’

‘My mate hev the title of Honourable, whether or no; so let’s have none of your slack,’ said Sol.

‘Don’t be a fool, young chopstick,’ exclaimed Mountclere. ‘Get the door opened.’

‘I will—in my own way,’ said Sol, testily. ‘You mustn’t mind my trading upon your quality, as ’tis a case of necessity. This is a woman nothing will bring to reason but an appeal to the higher powers. If every man of title was as useful as you are to-night, sir, I’d never call them lumber again as long as I live.’

‘How singular!’

‘There’s never a bit of rubbish that won’t come in use if you keep it seven years.’

‘If my utility depends upon keeping you company, may I go to h—— for lacking every atom of the virtue.’

‘Hear, hear! But it hardly is becoming in me to answer up to a man so much older than I, or I could say more. Suppose we draw a line here for the present, sir, and get indoors?’

‘Do what you will, in Heaven’s name.’

A few more words to the woman resulted in her agreeing to admit them if they would attend to themselves afterwards. This Sol promised, and the key of

the door was let down to them from the bedroom window by a string. When they had entered, Sol, who knew the house well, busied himself in lighting a fire, the driver going off with a lantern to the stable, where he found standing-room for the two horses. Mountclere walked up and down the kitchen, mumbling words of disgust at the situation, the few of this kind that he let out being just enough to show what a fearfully large number he kept in.

‘A-calling up people at this time of morning!’ the woman occasionally exclaimed down the stairs. ‘But folks show no mercy upon their flesh and blood—not one bit or mite.’

‘Now never be stomachy, my good soul,’ cried Sol from the fireplace, where he stood blowing the fire with his breath. ‘Only tell me where the victuals bide, and I’ll do all the cooking. We’ll pay like princes—especially my mate.’

‘There’s but little in house,’ said the sleepy woman from her bedroom. ‘There’s pig’s fry, a side of bacon, a conger eel, and pickled onions.’

‘Conger eel?’ said Sol to Mountclere.

‘No, thank you.’

‘Pig’s fry?’

‘No, thank you.’

‘Well, then, tell me where the bacon is,’ shouted Sol to the woman.

‘You must find it,’ came again down the stairs.

‘Tis somewhere up in chimley, but in which part I can’t mind. Really I don’t know whether I be upon my head or my heels, and my brain is all in a spin, wi’ being rafted up in such a larry!’

‘Bide where you be, there’s a dear,’ said Sol. ‘We’ll do it all. Just tell us where the tea-caddy is, and the gridiron, and then you can go to sleep again.’

The woman appeared to take his advice, for she gave the information, and silence soon reigned upstairs.

When one piece of bacon had been with difficulty cooked over the newly-lit fire, Sol said to Mountclere, with the rasher on his fork: ‘Now look here, sir, I think while I am making the tea, you ought to go on griddling some more of these, as you haven’t done nothing at all?’

‘I do the paying. . . . Well, give me the bacon.’

‘And when you have done yours, I’ll cook the man’s, as the pore feller’s hungry, I make no doubt.’

Mountclere, fork in hand, then began with his rasher, tossing it about the gridiron in masterly style, Sol attending to the tea. He was attracted from this occupation by a brilliant flame up the chimney, Mountclere exclaiming, ‘Now the cursed thing is on fire!’

‘Blow it out—hard—that’s it! Well now, sir, do you come and begin upon mine, as you must be hungry. I’ll finish the griddling. Ought we to mind

the man sitting down in our company, as there's no other room for him? I hear him coming in.'

'Oh no—not at all. Put him over at that table.'

'And I'll join him. You can sit here by yourself, sir.'

The meal was despatched, and the coachman again retired, promising to have the horses ready in about an hour and half. Sol and Mountclere made themselves comfortable upon either side of the fireplace, since there was no remedy for the delay: after sitting in silence awhile, they nodded and slept.

How long they would have remained thus, in consequence of their fatigues, there is no telling, had not the mistress of the cottage descended the stairs about two hours later, after peeping down upon them at intervals of five minutes during their sleep, lest they should leave without her knowledge. It was six o'clock, and Sol went out for the man, whom he found snoring in the hay-loft. There was now some necessity for haste, and in ten minutes they were again on their way.

Day dawned upon the 'Old Fox' inn at Anglebury with a timid and watery eye. From the shadowy archway came a shining lantern, which was seen to be dangling from the hand of a little bow-legged old man—the hostler, John. Having reached the front, he looked around to measure the daylight, opened the

lantern, and extinguished it by a pinch of his fingers. He paused for a moment to have the customary word or two with his neighbour the milkman, who usually appeared at this point at this time.

‘It sounds like the whistle of the morning train,’ the milkman said as he drew near, a scream from the further end of the town reaching their ears. ‘Well, I hope, now the wind’s in that quarter, we shall ha’e a little more fine weather—hey, hostler?’

‘What be ye a talking o’?’

‘Can hear the whistle plain, I say.’

‘Oh, ay. I suppose you do. But faith, ’tis a poor fist I can make at hearing anything. There, I could have told all the same that the wind was in the east, even if I had not seed poor Thomas Tribble’s smoke blowing across the little orchard. Joints be a true weathercock enough when past three-score. These easterly rains, when they do come, which is not often, come wi’ might enough to squail a man into his grave.’

‘Well, we must look for it, hostler. . . . Why, what mighty ekkypage is this, come to town at such a purblinking time of day?’

‘’Tis what time only can tell—though ’twill not be long first,’ the hostler replied, as the driver of the pair of horses and carriage containing Sol and Mountclere slackened pace, and drew rein before the inn.

Fresh horses were immediately called for, and

while they were being put in the two travellers walked up and down.

‘It is now a quarter to seven o’clock,’ said Mountclere; ‘and the question arises, shall I go on to Knollsea, or branch off at Coomb for Lychworth? I think the best plan will be to drive first to Lychworth, set me down, and then get him to take you on at once to Knollsea. What do you say?’

‘When shall I reach Knollsea by that arrangement?’

‘By half-past eight o’clock. We shall be at Lychworth before eight, which is excellent time.’

‘Very well, sir, I agree to that,’ said Sol, feeling that as soon as one of the two birds had been caught, the other could not mate without their knowledge.

The carriage and horses being again ready, away they drove at once, both having by this time grown too restless to spend in Anglebury a minute more than was necessary.

The hostler and his lad had taken the jaded Sandbourne horses to the stable, rubbed them down, and fed them, when another noise was heard outside the yard; the omnibus had returned from meeting the train. Relinquishing the horses to the small stable-lad, the old hostler again looked out from the arch.

A young man had stepped from the omnibus, and he came forward. ‘I want a conveyance of some sort to take me to Knollsea, at once. Can you get a horse harnessed in five minutes?’

‘I’ll make shift to do what I can, master, not promising about the minutes. The truest man can say no more. Won’t ye step into the bar, sir, and give your order? I’ll let ye know as soon as ’tis ready.’

Christopher turned into a room smelling strongly of the night before, and stood by the newly-kindled fire to wait. He had just come in haste from Melchester. The upshot of his excitement about the wedding, which, as the possible hour of its solemnisation drew near, had increased till it bore him on like a wind, was this unpremeditated journey. Lying awake the previous night, the hangings of his bed pulsing to every beat of his heart, he decided that there was one last and great service which it behoved him, as an honest man and friend, to say nothing of lover, to render to Ethelberta at this juncture. It was to ask her by some means whether or not she had engaged with open eyes to marry Lord Mountclere; and if not, to give her a word or two of enlightenment. That done, she might be left to take care of herself.

His plan was to obtain an interview with Picotee, and learn from her accurately the state of things. Should he, by any possibility, be mistaken in his belief as to the contracting parties, a knowledge of the mistake would be cheaply purchased by the journey. Should he not, he would send up to Ethelberta the strong note of expostulation which was already written, and waiting in his pocket. To intrude upon her at such a time was unseemly; and to despatch a letter by

a messenger before evidence of its necessity had been received was most undesirable. The whole proceeding at best was clumsy ; yet earnestness is mostly clumsy ; and how could he let the event pass without a protest ? Before daylight on that autumn morning he had risen, told Faith of his intention, and started off.

As soon as the vehicle was ready, Christopher hastened to the door and stepped up. The little stable-boy led the horse a few paces on the way before relinquishing his hold ; at the same moment a respectably-dressed man on foot, with a small black bag in his hand, came up from the opposite direction, along the street leading from the railway. He was a thin, elderly man, with grey hair ; that a great anxiety pervaded him was as plainly visible as were his features. Without entering the inn, he came up at once to old John.

‘ Have you anything going to Knollsea this morning that I can get a lift in ? ’ said the pedestrian—no other than Ethelberta’s father.

‘ Nothing empty, that I know of.’

‘ Or carrier ? ’

‘ No.’

‘ A matter of fifteen shillings, then, I suppose ? ’

‘ Yes—no doubt. But yond, there’s a young man just now starting ; he might not take it ill if ye were to ask him for a seat, and go halves in the hire of the trap. Shall I call out ? ’

‘ Ah, do.’

The hostler bawled to the stable-boy, who put the question to Christopher. 'There was room for two in the dogcart, and Julian had no objection to save the shillings of a fellow-traveller who was evidently not rich. When Chickereel mounted to his seat, Christopher paused to look at him as we pause in some enactment that seems to have been already before us in a dream long ago. Ethelberta's face was there, as the landscape is in the map, the romance in the history, the aim in the deed; denuded, rayless, and sorry, but discernible.

For the moment, however, this did not occur to Julian. He took the whip, the boy loosed his hold upon the horse, and they proceeded on their way.

'What slap-dash jinks may there be going on at Knollsea, then, my sonny?' said the hostler to the lad, as the dogcart and the backs of the two men diminished on the road. 'You be a Knollsea boy; have anything reached your young ears about what's in the wind there, David Straw?'

'No, nothing; except that 'tis going to be Christmas-day in five weeks; and then a hide-bound bull is going to be killed if he don't die afore the time, and gi'ed away by my lord in three-pound junks, as a reward to good people who never curse and sing bad songs, except when they be drunk; mother says perhaps she will have some, and 'tis excellent if well stewed, mother says.'

'A very fair chronicle for a boy to give, but not

what I asked for. When you try to answer a old man's question, always bear in mind what it was that old man asked. A hide-bound bull is good when well stewed, I make no doubt—for they who like it; but that's not it. What I said was, do you know why three fokes, a rich man, a middling man, and a poor man, should want horses for Knollsea afore seven o'clock in the morning on a blinking day in Fall, when everything is as wet as a dishclout, whereas that's more than often happens in fine summer weather?'

'No—I don't know, John hostler.'

'Then go home and tell your mother that ye be no wide-awake boy, and that old John, who went to school with her father afore she was born or thought o', says so. . . . Chok' it all, why should I think there's sommat going on at Knollsea? Honest travelling have been so rascally abused since I was a boy in pinders, by tribes of nobodies tearing from one end of the country to t'other, to see the sun go down in salt water, or the moon play jack-lantern behind some rotten tower or other, that, upon my song, when life and death's in the wind there's no telling the difference!'

'I like their sixpences ever so much.'

'Young sonny, don't you answer up to me when you baint in the story—stopping my words in that fashion. I won't have it, David. Now up in the tallet with ye, there's a good boy, and down with another lock or two of hay—as fast as you can do it for me.'

The boy vanished under the archway, and the hostler followed at his heels. Meanwhile the carriage bearing Mr. Mountclere and Sol was speeding on its way to Lychworth. When they reached the spot at which the road forked into two, they left the Knollsea route, and keeping thence under the hills for the distance of five or six miles, drove into Lord Mountclere's park. In ten minutes the house was before them, framed in by dripping trees.

Mountclere jumped out, and entered without ceremony. Sol, being anxious to know if Lord Mountclere was there, ordered the coachman to wait a few moments. It was now nearly eight o'clock, and the smoke which ascended from the newly-lit fires of the Court painted soft blue tints upon the brown and golden leaves of lofty boughs adjoining.

'Oh, Ethelberta!' said Sol, as he regarded the fair prospect.

The gravel of the drive had been washed clean and smooth by the night's rain, but there were fresh wheel marks other than their own upon the track. Yet the mansion seemed scarcely awake, and stillness reigned everywhere around.

Not more than three or four minutes had passed when the door was opened for Mountclere, and he came hastily from the doorsteps.

'I must go on with you,' he said, getting into the vehicle. 'He's gone.'

‘Where—to Knollsea?’ said Sol.

‘Yes,’ said Mountclere. ‘Now, go ahead to Knollsea!’ he shouted to the man. ‘To think I should be fooled like this! I had no idea that he would be leaving so soon! We might perhaps have been here an hour earlier by hard striving. But who was to dream that he would arrange to leave it at such an unearthly time of the morning at this dark season of the year? Drive—drive!’ he called again out of the window, and the pace was increased.

‘I have come two or three miles out of my way on account of you,’ said Sol, sullenly. ‘And all this time lost. I don’t see why you wanted to come here at all. I knew it would be a waste of time.’

‘D—— it all, man,’ said Mountclere; ‘it is no use for you to be angry with me.’

‘I think it is, for ’tis you have brought me into this muddle,’ said Sol, in no sweeter tone. ‘Ha, ha! Upon my life I should be inclined to laugh, if I were not so much inclined to do the other thing, at Berta’s trick of trying to make close family allies of such a cantankerous pair as you and I! So much of one mind as we be, so alike in our ways of living, so close connected in our callings and principles, so matched in manners and customs! ’twould be a thousand pities to part us—hey, Mr. Mountclere?’

Mountclere faintly laughed with the same hideous merriment at the same idea, and then both remained

in a withering silence, meant to express the utter contempt of each for the other, both in family and in person. They passed the Lodge, and again swept into the high road.

‘Drive on!’ said Mountclere, putting his head again out of the window, and shouting to the man. ‘Drive like the d——!’ he roared again a few minutes afterwards, in fuming dissatisfaction with their rate of progress.

‘Baint I doing of it?’ said the driver, turning angrily round. ‘I ain’t going to ruin my governor’s horses for strangers who won’t pay double for ’em—not I. I am driving as fast as I can. If other folks get in the way with their traps, I suppose I must drive round ’em, sir?’

There was a slight crash.

‘There!’ continued the coachman. ‘That’s what comes of my turning round!’

Sol looked out on the other side, and found that the fore-wheel of their carriage had become locked in the wheel of a dogcart they had overtaken, the road here being very narrow. Their coachman, who knew he was to blame for this mishap, felt the advantage of taking time by the forelock in a case of accusation, and began swearing at his victim as if he were the sinner. Sol jumped out, and looking up at the occupants of the other conveyance, saw against the sky the back elevation of his father and Christopher Julian,

sitting upon a little seat which they overhung, like two big puddings upon a small dish.

‘Father—what, you going?’ said Sol. ‘Is it about Berta that you’ve come?’

‘Yes, I got your letter,’ said Chickerel, ‘and I felt I should like to come—that I ought to come, to save her from that old rascal. Luckily, this gentleman, a stranger to me, has given me a lift from Anglebury, or I must have hired.’ He pointed to Christopher.

‘But he’s Mr. Julian!’ said Sol.

‘You are Mrs. Petherwin’s father?—and I have travelled in your company without knowing it!’ exclaimed Christopher, feeling and looking both astonished and puzzled. At first, it had appeared to him that, in direct antagonism to his own purpose, her friends were favouring Ethelberta’s wedding; but it was evidently otherwise.

‘Yes, that’s father,’ said Sol. ‘Father, this is Mr. Julian. Mr. Julian, this gentleman here is Lord Mountclere’s brother—and, to cut the story short, we all wish to stop the wedding.’

‘Then let us get on, in Heaven’s name!’ said Mountclere. ‘You are the lady’s father?’

‘I am,’ said Chickerel.

‘Then you had better come into this carriage. We shall go faster than the dogcart. Now, driver, are the wheels right again?’

Chickerel hastily entered with Mountclere, Sol

joined them, and they sped on. Christopher drove close in their rear, not quite certain whether he did well in going farther, now that there were plenty of people to attend to the business, but anxious to see the end. The other three sat in silence, with their eyes upon their knees, though the clouds were dispersing, and the morning grew bright. In about twenty minutes the square unembattled tower of Knollsea Church appeared below them in the vale, its summit just touching the distant line of sea upon sky. The element by which they had been victimised on the previous evening now smiled falsely to the low morning sun.

They descended the road to the village at a little more mannerly pace than that of the earlier journey, and saw the rays glance upon the hands of the church clock, which marked five-and-twenty minutes to nine.

CHAPTER XLVII.

KNOLLSEA—THE ROAD THENCE—LYCHWORTH.

ALL eyes were directed to the church-gate, as the travellers descended the hill. No wedding carriages were there, no favours, no slatternly group of women brimming with interest, no aged pauper on two sticks, who comes because he has nothing else to do till dying time, no nameless female passing by on the other side with a laugh of indifference, no ringers taking off their coats as they vanish up a turret, no hobbledehoys on tiptoe outside the chancel windows—in short, none whatever of the customary accessories of a country wedding was anywhere visible.

‘Thank God!’ said Chickerel.

‘Wait till you know He deserves it,’ said Mountclere.

‘Nothing’s done yet between them.’

‘It is not likely that anything is done at this time of day. But I have decided to go to the church first. You will probably go to your relative’s house at once?’

Sol looked to his father for a reply.

‘No, I too shall go to the church first, just to assure myself,’ said Chickereel. ‘I shall then go on to Mrs. Petherwin’s.’

The carriage was stopped at the corner of a steep incline leading down to the edifice. Mountclere and Chickereel alighted and walked on towards the gates, Sol remaining in his place. Christopher was some way off, descending the hill on foot, having halted to leave his horse and trap at a small inn at the entrance to the village.

When Chickereel and Mountclere reached the churchyard gate they found it slightly open. The church-door beyond it was also open, but nobody was near the spot.

‘We have arrived not a minute too soon, however,’ said Mountclere. ‘Preparations have apparently begun. Ha! ha! It was to be an early wedding, no doubt.’

Entering the building, they looked around; it was quite empty. Chickereel turned towards the chancel, his eye being attracted by a red kneeling-cushion, placed at about the middle of the altar-railing, as if for early use. Mountclere strode to the vestry, somewhat at a loss how to proceed in his difficult task of unearthing his brother, obtaining a private interview with him, and then, by the introduction of Sol and Chickereel, causing a general convulsion.

‘Ha! here’s somebody,’ he said, observing a man in the vestry. He advanced with the intention of

asking where Lord Mountclere was to be found. Chickereel came forward in the same direction.

‘Are you the parish clerk?’ said Mountclere to the man, who was dressed up in his best clothes.’

‘I hev the honour of that calling,’ the man replied.

Two large books were lying before him on the vestry table, one of them being open. As the clerk spoke he looked slantingly on the page, as a person might do to discover if some writing were dry. Mountclere and Chickereel gazed on the same page. The book was the marriage-register.

‘Too late!’ said Chickereel.

There plainly enough stood the signatures of Lord Mountclere and Ethelberta. The viscount’s was very black, and had not yet dried. Her strokes were firm, and comparatively thick for a woman, though paled by juxtaposition with her husband’s muddled characters. In the space for witnesses’ names appeared in trembling lines as fine as silk the autograph of Picotee, the second name being that of a stranger, probably the clerk.

‘Yes, yes—we are too late, it seems,’ said Mountclere coolly.

Chickereel stood like a man baked hard and dry. Further than his first two words he could say nothing.

‘They must have set about it early, upon my soul,’ Mountclere continued. ‘When did the wedding take place?’ he asked of the clerk sharply.

‘It was over about five minutes before you came in,’ replied that luminary, pleasantly, as he played at an invisible game of pitch-and-toss with some half-sovereigns in his pocket. ‘I received orders to have the church ready at five minutes to eight this morning, though I knew nothing about such a thing till bedtime last night. It was very private and plain, not that I should mind another such. a one, sir;’ and he secretly pitched and tossed again.

Meanwhile Sol had found himself too restless to sit waiting in the carriage for more than a minute after the other two had left it. He stepped out at the same instant that Christopher came past, and together they too went on to the church.

‘Father, ought we not to go on at once to Ethelberta’s, instead of waiting?’ said Sol, on reaching the vestry, still in ignorance. ‘’Twas no use coming in here.’

‘No use at all,’ said Chickerel, as if he had straw in his throat. ‘Look at this. I would almost sooner have had it that in leaving this church I came from her grave—well, no; perhaps not that, but I fear it is a bad thing!’

Sol then saw the names in the register, Christopher saw them, and the man closed the book. Christopher could not well command himself, and he retired.

‘I knew it. I always said that pride would lead Berta to marry an unworthy man, and so it has!’ said Sol, bitterly. ‘What shall we do now? I’ll see her.’

‘Do no such thing, young man,’ said Mountclere. ‘The best course is to leave matters alone. They are married. If you are wise, you will try to think the match a good one, and be content to let her keep her position without inconveniencing her by your intrusions or complaints. It is possible that the satisfaction of her ambition will help her to endure any few surprises to her propriety that may occur. She is a clever young woman, and has played her cards adroitly. I only hope she may never repent of the game. A-hem. Good morning.’ Saying this, Mountclere slightly bowed to his relations, and marched out of the church with dignity; but it was told afterwards by the coachman, who had no love for Mountclere, that when he stepped into the fly, and was as he believed unobserved, he was quite overcome with fatuous rage, his lips frothing like a mug of hot ale.

‘What an impertinent gentleman ’tis,’ said Chickereel. ‘As if we had tried for her to marry his brother!’

‘He knows better than that,’ said Sol. ‘But he’ll never believe that Berta didn’t lay a trap for the old fellow. He thinks at this moment that Lord Mountclere has never been told of us and our belongings.’

‘I wonder if she has deceived him in anything,’ murmured Chickereel. ‘I can hardly suppose it. But she is altogether beyond me. However, if she has misled him on any point she will suffer for it.’

‘You need not fear that, father. It isn’t her way

of working. Why couldn't she have known that when a title is to be had for the asking, the owner must be a shocking one indeed? D—— the title!'

'The title is well enough. Any poor scrubs in our place must be fools not to think the match a very rare and astonishing honour, as far as the position goes. But that my brave girl will be miserable is a part of the honour I can't stomach so well. If he had been any other peer in the kingdom, we might have been merry indeed. I believe he will ruin her happiness—yes, I do—not by any personal injury or rough conduct, but by causing her to be despised; and that is a thing she can't endure.'

'She's not to be despised without a deal of trouble—we must remember that. And if he insults her by introducing new favourites, as they say he did his first wife, I'll call upon him and ask his meaning, and take her away.'

'Nonsense—we shall never know what he does, or how she feels; she will never let out a word. However unhappy she may be, she will always deny it—that's the unfortunate part of such marriages.'

'An old chap like that ought to leave young women alone, d—— him!'

The clerk came nearer. 'I am afraid I cannot allow bad words to be spoke in this sacred pile,' he said. 'As far as my personal self goes, I should have no objection to your cussing as much as you like, but

as a servant of the church my conscience won't allow it to be done.'

'Your conscience has allowed something to be done that cussing and swearing are godly worship to.'

'The prettiest maid is left out of harness, however,' said the clerk. 'The little witness was the chicken to my taste—Lord forgive me for saying it, and a man with a wife and family!'

Sol and his father turned to withdraw, and soon forgot the remark, but it was frequently recalled by Christopher.

'Do you think of trying to see Ethelberta before you leave?' said Sol.

'Certainly not,' said Chickerel. 'Mr. Mountclere's advice was good in that. The more we keep out of the way the more good we are doing her. I shall go back to Anglebury by the carrier, and get on at once to London. You will go with me, I suppose?'

'The carrier does not leave yet for an hour or two.'

'I shall walk on, and let him overtake me. If possible, I will get one glimpse at Lychworth, and Berta's new home; there may be time, if I start at once.'

'I will walk with you,' said Sol.

'There is room for one with me,' said Christopher.

'I shall drive back early in the afternoon.'

‘Thank you,’ said Sol. ‘I will endeavour to meet you at Coomb.’

Thus it was arranged. Chickereel could have wished to search for Picotee, and learn from her the details of this mysterious matter. But it was particularly painful to him to make himself busy after the event; and to appear suddenly and uselessly where he was plainly not wished to appear would be an awkwardness which the pleasure of seeing either daughter could scarcely counterbalance. Hence he had resolved to return at once to town, and there await the news, together with the detailed directions as to his own future movements, carefully considered and laid down, which were sure to be given by the far-seeing Ethelberta.

Sol and his father walked on together, Chickereel to meet the carrier just beyond Lychworth, Sol to wait for Christopher at Coomb. His wish to see, in company with his father, the outline of the seat to which Ethelberta had been advanced that day, was the triumph of youthful curiosity and interest over dogged objection. His father’s wish was based on calmer reasons.

Christopher, lone and out of place, remained in the church yet a little longer. He desultorily walked round. Reaching the organ-chamber, he looked at the instrument, and was surprised to find behind it a young man. Julian first thought him to be the organist; on second inspection, however, he proved to be a person Christopher had met before, under far different cir-

cumstances; it was our young friend Ladywell, looking as sick and sorry as a lily with a slug in its stalk.

The occasion, the place, and their own condition, made them kin. Christopher had despised Ladywell, Ladywell had disliked Christopher; but a third item neutralised the other two—it was their common lot.

Christopher just nodded, for they had only met on Ethelberta's stairs. Ladywell nodded more, and spoke. 'The church appears to be interesting,' he said.

'Yes. A detached tower is rare in England,' said Christopher.

They then dwelt on other features of the building, thence enlarging to the village, and then to the rocks and marine scenery, both avoiding the malady they suffered from—the marriage of Ethelberta.

'The village streets are very picturesque, and the cliff scenery is good of its kind,' rejoined Ladywell. 'The rocks represent the feminine side of grandeur. Here they are white, with delicate tops. On the west coast they are higher, black, and with angular summits. Those represent grandeur in its masculine aspect. It is merely my own idea, and not very bright, perhaps.'

'It is very ingenious,' said Christopher, 'and perfectly true.'

Ladywell was pleased. 'I am here at present making sketches for my next subject—a winter sea. Otherwise I should not have—happened to be in the church.'

‘ You are acquainted with Mrs. Petherwin—I think you are Mr. Ladywell, who painted her portrait last season ? ’

‘ Yes,’ said Ladywell, colouring.

‘ You may have heard her speak of Mr. Julian ? ’

‘ Oh yes,’ said Ladywell, offering his hand. Then by degrees their tongues wound closer round the subject of their sadness, each tacitly owning to what he would not tell.

‘ I saw it,’ said Ladywell, heavily.

‘ Did she look troubled ? ’

‘ Not in the least—bright and fresh as a May morning. She has played me many a bitter trick, and poor Neigh too, a friend of mine. But I cannot help forgiving her. . . . I saw a carriage at the door, and strolled in. The ceremony was just proceeding, so I sat down here. Well, I have done with Knollsea. The place has no further interest for me now. I may own to you as a friend, that if she had not been living here I should have studied at some other coast—of course that’s in confidence.’

‘ I understand, quite.’

‘ I only arrived two days ago, and did not set eyes upon her till this morning, she has kept so entirely indoors.’

Then the young men parted, and half an hour later the ingenuous Ladywell came from the visitors’ inn by the shore, a man walking behind him with a quantity

of artists' materials and appliances. He went on board the steamer, which this morning had performed the passage in safety. Ethelberta single having been the loadstone in the cliffs that had attracted Ladywell hither, Ethelberta married was a negative which sent him away. And thus did a woman put an end to the only opportunity of distinction, on exhibition walls, that ever offered itself to the tortuous ways, quaint alleys, and marbled bluffs of Knollsea, as accessories in the picture of a winter sea.

Christopher's interest in the village was of the same evaporating nature. He looked upon the sea, and the great swell, and the waves sending up a sound like the huzzas of multitudes; but all the wild scene was irksome now. The ocean-bound steamers far away on the horizon inspired him with no curiosity as to their destination; the house Ethelberta had occupied was positively hateful; and he turned away to wait impatiently for the hour at which he had promised to drive on to meet Sol at Coomb.

Sol and Chickereel plodded along the road, in order to skirt Lychworth before the carrier came up. Reaching the top of a hill on their way, they paused to look down on a peaceful scene. It was a park and wood, glowing in all the matchless colours of late autumn, parapets and pediments peering out from a central position afar. At the bottom of the descent before them was a lodge, to which they now descended. The

gate stood invitingly open. Exclusiveness was no part of the owner's instincts; one could see that at a glance. No appearance of a well-rolled garden-path attached to the park-drive; as is the case with many, betokening by the perfection of their surfaces their proprietor's deficiency in hospitality. The approach was like a turnpike road, full of great ruts, clumsy mendings; bordered by trampled edges and incursions upon the grass at pleasure. Butchers and bakers drove as freely herein as peers and peeresses. Christening parties, wedding companies, and funeral trains passed along by the doors of the mansion without check or question. A wild untidiness in this particular has its recommendations; for guarded grounds ever convey a suspicion that their owner is young to landed possessions, as religious earnestness implies newness of conversion, and conjugal tenderness recent marriage.

Half-an-hour being wanting as yet to Chickerel's time with the carrier, Sol and himself, like the rest of the world when at leisure, walked into the extensive stretch of grass and grove. It formed a park so large that not one of its owners had ever wished it larger, not one of its owner's rivals had ever failed to wish it smaller, and not one of its owner's satellites had ever seen it without praise. They somewhat avoided the roadway, passing under the huge, mis-shapen, ragged trees, and through fern-brakes, ruddy and crisp in their decay. On reaching a suitable eminence, the

father and son stood still to look upon the many-chimneyed building, or rather conglomeration of buildings, to which these groves and glades formed a setting.

‘We will just give a glance,’ said Chickereel, ‘and then go away. It does not seem well to me that Ethelberta should have this; it is too much. The sudden change will do her no good. I never believe in anything that comes in the shape of wonderful luck. As it comes, so it goes. Had she been brought home to-day to one of those tenant-farms instead of these woods and walls, I could have called it good fortune. What she should have done was glorify herself by glorifying her own line of life, not by forsaking that line for another. Better have been admired as a governess than shunned as a peeress, which is what she will be. But it is just the same everywhere in these days. Young men will rather wear a black coat and starve than wear fustian and do well.’

‘One man to want such a monstrous house as that! Well, ’tis a fine place. See, there’s the carpenters’ shops, the timber-yard, and everything, as if it were a little town. Perhaps Berta may hire me for a job now and then.’

‘I always knew she would cut herself off from us. She marked for it from childhood, and she has finished the business thoroughly.’

‘Well, it is no matter, father, for why should we want to trouble her? She may write, and I shall answer; but if she calls to see me, I shall not return

the visit; and if she meets me with her husband or any of her new society about her, I shall behave as a stranger.'

'It will be best,' said Chickereel. 'Well, now I must move.'

However, by the sorcery of accident, before they had very far retraced their steps an open carriage became visible round a bend in the drive. Chickereel, with a servant's instinct, was for beating a retreat.

'No,' said Sol. 'Let us stand our ground. We have already been seen, and we do no harm.'

So they stood still on the edge of the drive, and the carriage drew near. It was a landau, and the sun shone in upon Lord Mountclere, with Lady Mountclere sitting beside him, like Abishag beside King David.

Very blithe looked the viscount, for he rode upon a cherub to-day. She appeared fresh, rosy, and strong, but dubious; though if mien was anything, she was a countess twice over. Her dress was of a dove-coloured material, with a bonnet to match, a little tufted white feather resting on the top, like a truce-flag between the blood of noble and vassal. Upon the cool grey of her shoulders hung a few locks of hair, toned warm as fire by the sunshiny addition to its natural hue.

Chickereel instinctively took off his hat; Sol did the same.

For only a moment did Ethelberta seem uncertain how to act. But a solution to her difficulty was given by the face of her brother. There she saw plainly at

one glance more than a dozen speeches would have told—for Sol's features thoroughly expressed his intention that to him she was to be a stranger. Her eyes flew to Chickerel, and he slightly shook his head. She understood them now. With a tear in her eye for her father, and a sigh in her bosom for Sol, she bowed in answer to their salute; her husband moved his hat and nodded, and the carriage rolled on. Lord Mountclere might possibly be making use of the fine morning in showing her the park and premises. Chickerel, with a moist eye, now went on with his son towards the high road. When they reached the lodge, the lodge-keeper was walking in the sun, smoking his pipe. 'Good morning,' he said to Chickerel.

'Any rejoicings at the Court to-day?' the butler enquired.

'Quite the reverse. Not a soul there. 'Tisn't knowed anywhere at all. I had no idea of such a thing till he brought my lady here. Not going off, neither. They've come home like the commonest couple in the land, and not even the bells allowed to ring.'

They walked along the public road, and the carrier came in view.

'Father,' said Sol, 'I don't think I'll go further with you. She's gone into the house; and suppose she should run back without him to try to find us? It would be cruel to disappoint her. I'll bide

about here for a quarter of an hour, in case she should. Mr. Julian won't have passed till I come out.'

'Well, one or two of her old ways may be left in her still, and it is not a bad thought. Then you will walk the rest of the distance if you don't meet Mr. Julian? I must be in London by the evening.'

'Any time to-night will do for me. I shall not begin work until to-morrow, so that the four o'clock train will answer my purpose.'

Thus they parted, and Sol strolled leisurely back. The road was quite deserted, and he lingered by the park fence.

'Sol!' said a bird-like voice; 'how did you come here?'

He looked up, and saw a figure peering down upon him from the top of the park wall, the ground on the inside being higher than the road. The speaker was to the expected Ethelberta what the moon is to the sun, a star to the moon. It was Picotee.

'Hullo, Picotee!' said Sol.

'There's a little gate a quarter of a mile farther on,' said Picotee. 'We can meet there without your passing through the big lodge. I'll be there as soon as you.'

Sol ascended the hill, passed through the second gate, and turned back again, when he met Picotee coming forward under the trees. They walked together in this secluded spot.

'Berta says she wants to see you and father,' said

Picotée, breathlessly. 'You must come in and make yourselves comfortable. She had no idea you were here so secretly, and she didn't know what to do.'

'Father's gone,' said Sol.

'How vexed she will be! She thinks there is something the matter—that you are angry with her for not telling you earlier. But you will come in, Sol?'

'No, I can't come in,' said her brother.

'Why not? It is such a big house, you can't think. You need not come near the front apartments, if you think we shall be ashamed of you in your working clothes. How came you not to dress up a bit, Sol? Still, Berta won't mind it much. She says Lord Mountclere must take her as she is, or he is kindly welcome to leave her.'

'Ah, well! I might have had a word or two to say about that, but the time has gone by for it, worse luck. Perhaps it is best that I have said nothing, and she has had her way. No, I shan't come in, Picotée. Father is gone, and I am going too.'

'Oh, Sol!'

'We are rather put out at her acting like this—father and I and all of us. She might have let us know about it beforehand, even if she is a lady and we what we always was. It wouldn't have let her down so terrible much to write a line. She might have learnt something that would have led her to take a different step.'

‘But you will see poor Berta? She has done no harm. She was going to write long letters to all of you to-day, explaining her wedding, and how she is going to help us all on in the world.’

Sol paused irresolutely. ‘No, I won’t come in,’ he said. ‘It would disgrace her, for one thing, dressed as I be; more than that, I don’t want to come in. But I should like to see her, if she would like to see me; and I’ll go up there to that little fir plantation, and walk up and down behind it for exactly half an hour. She can come out to me there.’ Sol had pointed as he spoke to a knot of young trees that hooded a knoll a little way off.

‘I’ll go and tell her,’ said Picotee.

‘I suppose they will be off somewhere, and she is busy getting ready?’

‘Oh, no. They are not going to travel till next year. Ethelberta does not want to go anywhere; and Lord Mountclere cannot endure this changeable weather in any place but his own house.’

‘Poor fellow!’

‘Then you will wait for her by the firs? I’ll tell her at once.’

Picotee left him, and Sol went across the glade.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

LYCHWORTH (*continued*)—THE ANGLEBURY HIGHWAY.

HE had not paced behind the firs more than ten minutes when Ethelberta appeared from the opposite side. At great inconvenience to herself, she had complied with his request.

Ethelberta was trembling. She took her brother's hand, and said, 'Is father then, gone?'

'Yes,' said Sol. 'I should have been gone likewise, but I thought you wanted to see me.'

'Of course I did, and him too. Why did you come so mysteriously, and, I must say, unbecomingly? I am afraid I did wrong in not informing you of my intention.'

'To yourself you may have. Father would have liked a word with you before—you did it.'

'You both looked so forbidding that I did not like to stop the carriage when we passed you. I want to see him on an important matter—his leaving Mrs. Doncastle's service at once. I am going to write and beg her to dispense with a notice, which I have no doubt she will do.'

‘He’s very much upset about you.’

My secrecy was perhaps an error of judgment,’ she said, sadly. ‘But I had reasons. Why did you and my father come here at all if you did not want to see me?’

‘We did want to see you—up to a certain time.’

‘You did not come to prevent my marriage?’

‘We wished to see you before the marriage—I can’t say more.’

‘I thought you might not approve of what I had done,’ said Ethelberta, mournfully. ‘But a time may come when you will approve.’

‘Never.’

‘Don’t be harsh, Sol. A coronet covers a multitude of sins.’

‘A coronet: good Lord—and you my sister! Look at my hand.’ Sol extended his hand. ‘Look how my thumb stands out at the root, as if it were out of joint, and that hard place inside there. Did you ever see anything so ugly as that hand—a mis-shaped monster, isn’t he? That comes from the jack-plane, and my pushing against it day after day and year after year. If I were found drowned or buried, dressed or undressed, in fustian or in broadcloth, folk would look at my hand and say, “That man’s a carpenter.” Well now, how can a man, branded with work as I be; be brother to a viscountess without something being wrong?’

Of course there's something wrong in it, or he wouldn't have married you—something which won't be righted without terrible suffering.'

'No, no,' said she. 'You are mistaken. There is no such wonderful quality in a title in these days. What I really am is second wife to a quiet old country nobleman, who has given up society. What more commonplace? My life will be as simple, even more simple, than it was before.'

'Berta, you have worked to false lines. A creeping up among the useless lumber of our nation that'll be the first to burn if there comes a flare. I never see such a deserter of your own lot as you be! But you were always like it, Berta, and I am ashamed of ye. More than that, a good woman never marries twice.'

'You are too hard, Sol,' said the poor viscountess, almost crying. 'I've done it all for you! Even if I have made a mistake, and given my ambition an ignoble turn, don't tell me so now, or you may do more harm in a minute than you will cure in a lifetime. It is absurd to let republican passions so blind you to fact. A family which can be honourably traced through history for five hundred years does affect the heart of a person not entirely hardened against romance. Whether you like the peerage or no, they appeal to our historical sense and love of old associations.'

'I don't care for history. Prophecy is the only thing can do poor men any good. When you were a

girl, you wouldn't drop a curtsey to 'em, historical or otherwise, and there you were right. But, instead of sticking to such principles, you must needs push up, so as to get girls such as you were once to curtsey to you, not even thinking marriage with a bad man too great a price to pay for't.'

'A bad man? What do you mean by that? Lord Mountclere is rather old, but he's worthy. What did you mean, Sol?'

'Nothing—a mere expression.'

At that moment Picotee emerged from behind a tree, and told her sister that Lord Mountclere was looking for her.

'Well, Sol, I cannot explain all to you now,' she said. 'I will send for you in London.' She wished him good-bye, and they separated, Picotee accompanying Sol a little on his way.

Ethelberta was greatly perturbed by this meeting. After retracing her steps a short distance, she still felt so distressed and unpresentable that she resolved not to allow Lord Mountclere to see her till the clouds had somewhat passed off; it was but a bare act of justice to him to hide from his sight such a bridal mood as this. It was better to keep him waiting than to make him positively unhappy. She turned aside, and went up the valley, where the park merged in miles of wood and copse.

She opened an iron gate and entered the wood,

casually interested in the vast variety of colours that the half-fallen leaves of this season wore : more, much more, occupied with personal thought. The path she pursued became gradually involved in bushes as well as trees, giving to the spot the character rather of a coppice than a wood. Perceiving that she had gone far enough, Ethelberta turned back by a path which at this point intersected that by which she had approached, and promised a more direct return towards the Court. She had not gone many steps among the hazels, which here formed a perfect thicket, when she observed a belt of holly-bushes in their midst ; towards the outskirts of these an opening on her left hand directly led, thence winding round into a clear space of greensward, which they completely enclosed. On this isolated and mewed-up bit of lawn stood a timber-built cottage, having ornamental barge-boards, balconettes, and porch. It was an object interesting as an experiment, and grand as a toy, but as a building contemptible. A blue gauze of smoke floated over the chimney, as if somebody was living there ; round towards the side some empty hen-coops were piled away ; while under the hollies were divers erections of wire netting and sticks, showing that birds were kept here at some seasons of the year.

Being lady of all she surveyed, Ethelberta crossed the leafy sward, and knocked at the door. She was interested in knowing the purpose of the peculiar little edifice.

The door was opened by a woman wearing a clean apron upon a not very clean gown. Ethelberta asked who lived in so pretty a place.

‘Miss Gruchette,’ the servant replied. ‘But she is not here now.’

‘Does she live here alone?’

‘Yes—excepting myself and a fellow-servant.’

‘Oh.’

‘She lives here to attend to the pheasants and poultry, because she is so clever in managing them. They are brought here from the keeper’s over the hill. Her father was a fancier.’

‘Miss Gruchette attends to the birds, and two servants attend to Miss Gruchette?’

‘Well, to tell the truth, m’m, the servants do almost all of it. Still, that’s what Miss Gruchette is here for. Would you like to see the house? it is pretty.’ The woman spoke with hesitation, as if in doubt between the desire of earning a shilling and the fear that Ethelberta was not a stranger. That Ethelberta was Lady Mountclere she plainly did not dream.

‘I fear I can scarcely stay long enough; yet I will just look in,’ said Ethelberta. And as soon as they had crossed the threshold she was glad of having done so.

The cottage internally may be described as a sort of boudoir extracted from the bulk of a mansion and deposited in a wood. The front room was filled with

nicknacks, curious work-tables, filigree baskets, twisted brackets supporting statuettes, in which the grotesque in every case ruled the design; love-birds, in gilt cages; French bronzes, wonderful boxes, needlework of strange patterns, and other attractive objects. The apartment was one of those which seem to laugh in a visitor's face, and on closer examination express frivolity more distinctly than by words.

'Miss Gruchette is here to keep the fowls?' said Ethelberta, in a puzzled tone, after a survey.

'Yes. But they don't keep her.'

Ethelberta did not attempt to understand, and ceased to occupy her mind with the matter. They came from the cottage to the door, where she gave the woman a trifling sum, and turned to leave. But footsteps were at that moment to be heard beating among the leaves on the other side of the hollies, and Ethelberta waited till the walkers should have passed. The voices of two men reached herself and the woman as they stood. They were close to the house, yet screened from it by the holly-bushes, when one could be heard to say distinctly, as if with his face turned to the cottage—

'Lady Mountclere gone for good?'

'I suppose so. Ha-ha! So come, so go.'

The speakers passed on, their backs becoming visible through the opening. They appeared to be woodmen.

‘What Lady Mountclere do they mean?’ said Ethelberta.

The woman blushed. ‘They meant Miss Gruchette.’

‘Oh—a nickname.’

‘Yes.’

‘Why?’

The woman whispered why in a story of about two minutes’ length. Ethelberta turned pale.

‘Is she going to return?’ she enquired in a thin hard voice.

‘Yes; next week. You know her, m’m?’

‘No. I am a stranger.’

‘So much the better. I may tell you, then, that an odd tale is flying about the neighbourhood—that Lord Mountclere was privately married to another woman, at Knollsea, this morning early. Can it be true?’

‘I believe it to be true.’

‘And that she is of no family?’

‘Of no family.’

‘Indeed. Then the Lord only knows what will become of the poor thing. There will be murder between ’em.’

‘Between whom?’

‘Her and the lady who lives here. She won’t budge an inch—not she!’

Ethelberta moved aside. A shade seemed to overspread the world, the sky, the trees, and the objects in

the foreground. She kept her face away from the woman, and, whispering a reply to her Good-morning, passed through the hollies into the leaf-strewn path. As soon as she came to a large trunk she placed her hands against it and rested her face upon them. She drew herself lower down, lower, lower, till she crouched upon the leaves. 'Ay—'tis what father and Sol meant. Oh, Heaven!' she whispered.

She soon arose, and went on her way to the house. Her fair features were firmly set, and she scarcely heeded the path in the concentration which had followed her paroxysm. When she reached the park proper she became aware of an excitement that was in progress there.

Ethelberta's absence had become unaccountable to Lord Mountclere, who could hardly permit her retirement from his sight for a minute. But at first he had made due allowance for her eccentricity as a woman of genius, and would not take notice of the half-hour's desertion, unpardonable as it might have been in other classes of wives. Then he had enquired, searched, been alarmed: he had finally sent men-servants in all directions about the park to look for her. He feared she had fallen out of a window, down a well, or into the lake. The next stage of search was to have been drags and grapnels; but Ethelberta entered the house.

Lord Mountclere rushed forward to meet her, and

such was her contrivance that he noticed no change. The searchers were called in, Ethelberta explaining that she had merely obeyed the wish of her brother in going out to meet him. Picotee, who had returned from her walk with Sol, was upstairs in one of the rooms which had been allotted to her. Ethelberta managed to run in there on her way upstairs to her own chamber.

‘Picotee, put your things on again,’ she said. ‘You are the only friend I have in this house, and I want one badly. Go to Sol, and deliver this message to him—that I want to see him at once. You must overtake him, if you walk all the way to Anglebury. But the train does not leave till four, so that there is plenty of time.’

‘What is the matter?’ said Picotee. ‘I cannot walk all the way.’

‘I don’t think you will have to do that—I hope not.’

‘He is going to stop at Coomb to have a bit of lunch: I might overtake him there, if I must!’

‘Yes. And tell him to come to the east passage door. It is that door next to the entrance to the stable-yard. There is a little yew-tree outside it. On second thoughts you, dear, must not come back. Wait at Coomb in the little inn parlour till Sol comes to you again. You will probably then have to go home to London alone; but do not mind it. The worst part for you will be in going from the station to the

Crescent; but nobody will molest you in a four-wheel cab: you have done it before. However, he will tell you if this is necessary when he gets back. I can best fight my battles alone. You shall have a letter from me the day after to-morrow, stating where I am. I shall not be here.'

'But what is it so dreadful?'

'Nothing to frighten you.' But she spoke with a breathlessness that completely nullified the assurance. 'It is merely that I find I must come to an explanation with Lord Mountclere before I can live here permanently, and I cannot stipulate with him while I am here in his power. Till I write, good-bye. Your things are not unpacked, so let them remain here for the present—they can be sent for.'

Poor Picotee, more agitated than her sister, but never questioning her orders, went downstairs and out of the house. She ran across the shrubberies, into the park, and to the gate whereat Sol had emerged some half-hour earlier. She trotted along upon the turnpike-road like a lost doe, crying as she went at the new trouble which had come upon Berta, whatever that trouble might be. Behind her she heard wheels and the stepping of a horse, but she was too concerned to turn her head. The pace of the vehicle slackened, however, when it was abreast of Picotee, and she looked up to see Christopher as the driver.

'Miss Chickerel!' he said, with surprise.

Picotee had quickly looked down again, and she murmured, 'Yes.'

Christopher asked what he could not help asking under the circumstances, 'Would you like to ride?'

'I should be glad,' said she, overcoming her flurry. 'I am anxious to overtake my brother Sol.'

'I have arranged to pick him up at Coomb,' said Christopher.

He descended, and assisted her to mount beside him, and drove on again, almost in silence. He was inclined to believe that some supernatural legerdemain had to do with these periodic impacts of Picotee on his path. She sat mute and melancholy till they were within half a mile of Coomb.

'Thank you,' she said then, perceiving Sol upon the road. 'There is my brother; I will get down now.'

'He was going to ride on to Anglebury with me,' said Julian.

Picotee did not reply, and Sol turned round. Seeing her he instantly exclaimed, 'What's the matter, Picotee?'

She explained to him that he was to go back immediately, and meet her sister at the door by the yew, as Ethelberta had charged her. Christopher, knowing them so well, was too much an interested member of the group to be left out of confidence, and she included him in her audience.

'And what are you to do?' said Sol to her.

‘I am to wait at Coomb till you come to me.’

‘I can’t understand it,’ Sol muttered, with a gloomy face. ‘There’s something wrong; and it was only to be expected; that’s what I say, Mr. Julian.’

‘If necessary I can take care of Miss Chickereel till you come,’ said Christopher.

‘Thank you,’ said Sol. ‘Then I will return to you as soon as I can, at the “Castle” Inn, just ahead. ’Tis very awkward for you to be so burdened by us, Mr. Julian; but we are in a trouble that I don’t yet see the bottom of.’

‘I know,’ said Christopher, kindly. ‘We will wait for you.’

He then drove on with Picotee to the inn, which was not far off, and Sol returned again to Lychworth. Feeling somewhat like a thief in the night, he zigzagged through the park, behind belts and knots of trees, until he saw the yew, dark and clear, as if drawn in ink upon the fair face of the mansion. The way up to it was in a little cutting between shrubs, the door being a private entrance, sunk below the surface of the lawn, and invisible from other parts of the same front. As soon as he reached it, Ethelberta opened it at once, as if she had listened for his footsteps.

She took him along a passage in the basement, up a flight of steps, and into a huge, solitary, chill apartment. It was the ball-room. Spacious mirrors in gilt frames formed panels in the lower part of the walls,

the remainder being toned in sage-green. In a recess between each mirror was a statue. The ceiling rose in a segmental curve, and bore sprawling upon its face gilt figures of wanton goddesses, cupids, satyrs with tambourines drums and trumpets, the whole ceiling seeming alive with them. But the room was very gloomy now, there being little light admitted from without, and the reflections from the mirrors gave a depressing coldness to the scene. It was a place intended to look joyous by night, and whatever it chose to look by day.

‘We are safe here,’ said she. ‘But we must listen for footsteps. I have only five minutes: Lord Mountclere is waiting for me. I mean to leave this place, come what may.’

‘Why?’ said Sol, in astonishment.

‘I cannot tell you—something has occurred. God has got me in his power at last, and is going to scourge me for my bad doings—that’s what it seems like. Sol, listen to me, and do exactly what I say. Go to Anglebury, hire a brougham, bring it on as far as Lower Lychworth: you will have to meet me with it at one of the park gates later in the evening—probably the west, at half-past seven. Leave it at the village with the man, come on here on foot, and stay under the trees till just before six: it will then be quite dark, and you must stand under the projecting balustrade a little further on than the door you came in by. I will just

step upon the balcony over it, and tell you more exactly than I can now the precise time that I shall be able to slip out, and where the carriage is to be waiting. But it may not be safe to speak on account of his closeness to me—I will hand down a note. I find it is impossible to leave the house by daylight—I am certain to be pursued—he already suspects something. Now I must be going, or he will be here, for he watches my movements because of some accidental words that escaped me.’

‘Berta, I sha’n’t have anything to do with this,’ said Sol. ‘It is not right!’

‘I am only going to Rouen, to Aunt Charlotte!’ she implored. ‘I want to get to Southampton, to be in time for the midnight steamer. When I am at Rouen I can negotiate with Lord Mountclere the terms on which I will return to him. It is the only chance I have of rooting out a scandal and a disgrace which threatens the beginning of my life here! My letters to him, and his to me, can be forwarded through you or through father, and he will not know where I am. Any woman is justified in adopting such a course to bring her husband to a sense of her dignity. If I don’t go away now, it will end in a permanent separation. If I leave at once, and stipulate that he gets rid of her, we may be reconciled.’

‘I can’t help you: you must stick to your husband. I don’t like them, or any of their sort, barring about

three or four, for the reason that they despise me and all my sort. But, Ethelberta, for all that I'll play fair with them. No half-and-half trimming business. You have joined 'em, and 'rayed yourself against us; and there you'd better bide. You have married your man, and your duty is towards him. I know what he is, and so does father; but if I were to help you to run away now, I should scorn myself more than I scorn him.'

'I don't care for that, or for any such politics! The Mountclere line is noble, and how was I to know that this member was not noble, too? As the representative of an illustrious family I was taken with him, but as a man—I must shun him.'

'How can you shun him? You have married him!'

'Nevertheless I won't stay. Neither law nor gospel demands it of me after what I have learnt. And if law and gospel did demand it, I would not stay. And if you will not help me to escape, I go alone.'

'You had better not try any such wild thing.'

The creaking of a door was heard. 'Oh, Sol,' she said, appealingly, 'don't go into the question whether I am right or wrong—only remember that I am very unhappy. Do help me—I have no other person in the world to ask! Be under the balcony at six o'clock. Say you will—I must go—say you will!'

'I'll think,' said Sol, very much disturbed. 'There,

don't cry; I'll try to be under the balcony, at any rate. I cannot promise more, but I'll try to be there.'

She opened in the panelling one of the old-fashioned concealed modes of exit known as jib-doors, which it was once the custom to construct without architraves in the walls of large apartments, so as not to interfere with the general design of the room. Sol found himself in a narrow passage, running down the whole length of the ball-room, and at the same time he heard Lord Mountclere's voice within, talking to Ethelberta. Sol's escape had been marvellous: as it was the viscount might have seen her tears. He passed down some steps, along an area from which he could see into a row of servants' offices, among them a kitchen with a fireplace flaming like an altar of sacrifice. Nobody seemed to be concerned about him; there were workmen upon the premises, and he nearly matched them. At last he got again into the shrubberies and to the side of the park by which he had entered.

On reaching Coomb he found Picotee in the parlour of the little inn, as he had directed. Mr. Julian, she said, had walked up to the ruins, and would be back again in a few minutes. Sol ordered the horse to be put in, and by the time it was ready Christopher came down from the hill. Room was made for Sol by opening the flap of the dogcart, and Christopher drove on.

He was anxious to know the trouble, and Sol was

not reluctant to share the burden of it with one whom he believed to be a friend. He told, scrap by scrap, the strange request of Ethelberta. Christopher, though ignorant of Ethelberta's experience that morning, instantly assumed that the discovery of some concealed spectre had led to this precipitancy.

‘When does she wish you to meet her with the carriage?’

‘Probably at half-past seven, at the west lodge; but that is to be finally fixed by a note she will hand down to me from the balcony.’

‘Which balcony?’

‘The nearest to the yew-tree.’

‘At what time will she hand the note?’

‘As the Court clock strikes six, she says. And if I am not there to take her instructions of course she will give up the idea, which is just what I want her to do.’

Christopher begged Sol to go. Whether Ethelberta was right or wrong, he did not stop to enquire. She was in trouble; she was too clear-headed to be in trouble without good reason; and she wanted assistance out of it. But such was Sol's nature that the more he reflected the more determined was he in not giving way to her entreaty. By the time that they reached Anglebury he repented having given way so far as to withhold a direct refusal.

‘It can do no good,’ he said, mournfully. ‘It is

better to nip her notion in its beginning. She says she wants to fly to Rouen, and from there arrange terms with him. But it can't be done—she should have thought of terms before.'

Christopher made no further reply. Leaving word at the 'Old Fox' that a man was to be sent to take the horse of him, he drove directly onwards to the station.

'Then you don't mean to help her?' said Julian, when Sol took the tickets—one for himself and one for Picotee.

'I serve her best by leaving her alone,' said Sol.

'I don't think so.'

'She has married him.'

'She is in distress.'

'She has married him.'

Sol and Picotee took their seats, Picotee upbraiding her brother. 'I can go by myself!' she said, in tears. 'Do go back for Berta, Sol. She said I was to go home alone, and I can do it!'

'You must not. It is not right for you to be hiring cabs and driving across London at midnight. Berta should have known better than propose it.'

'She was flurried. Go, Sol!'

But her entreaty was fruitless.

'Have you got your ticket, Mr. Julian?' said Sol. 'I suppose we shall go together till we get near Melchester?'

‘I have not got my ticket yet—I’ll be back in two minutes.’

The minutes went by, and Christopher did not reappear. The train moved off: Christopher was seen running up the platform, as if in a vain hope to catch it.

‘He has missed the train,’ said Sol. Picotee looked disappointed, and said nothing. They were soon out of sight.

‘God forgive me for such a hollow pretence!’ said Christopher to himself. ‘But he would have been uneasy had he known I wished to stay behind. I cannot leave her in trouble like this!’

He went back to the ‘Old Fox’ with the manner and movement of a man who after a lifetime of desultoriness had at last found something to do. It was now getting late in the afternoon. Christopher ordered a one-horse brougham at the inn, and entering it was driven out of the town towards Lychworth as the evening shades were beginning to fall. They passed into the village of Lower Lychworth at half-past five, and drew up at a beer-house at the end. Jumping out here, Julian told the man to wait till he should return.

Thus far he had exactly obeyed her orders to Sol. He hoped to be able to obey them throughout, and supply her with the aid her brother refused. He also hoped that the change in the personality of her confederate would make no difference to her intention. That he was putting himself in a wrong position he

allowed, but time and attention were requisite for such analyses: meanwhile Ethelberta was in trouble. On the one hand was she waiting hopefully for Sol; on the other was Sol many miles on his way to town; between them was himself.

He ran with all his might towards Lychworth Park, mounted the lofty stone steps by the lodge, saw the dark bronze figures on the piers through the twilight, and then proceeded to thread the trees. Among these he struck a light for a moment: it was ten minutes to six. In another five minutes he was panting beneath the walls of her house.

Lychworth Court was not unknown to Christopher, for he had frequently explored that spot in his Sandbourne days. He perceived now why she had selected that particular balcony for handing down directions; it was the only one round the house that was low enough to be reached from the outside, the basement here being a little way sunk in the ground.

He went close under, turned his face outwards, and waited. About a foot over his head was the stone floor of the balcony, forming a ceiling to his position. At his back, two or three feet behind, was a blank wall—the wall of the house. In front of him was the misty park, crowned by a sky sparkling with winter stars. This was abruptly cut off upward by the dark edge of the balcony which overhung him.

It was as if some person within the room above had

been awaiting his approach. He had scarcely found time to observe his situation when a human hand and portion of a bare arm were thrust between the balusters, descended a little way from the edge of the balcony, and remained hanging across the starlit sky. Something was between the fingers. Christopher lifted his hand, took the scrap, which was paper, and the arm was withdrawn. As it withdrew, a jewel on one of the fingers sparkled in the rays of a large planet that rode in the opposite sky.

Light steps retreated from the balcony, and a window closed. Christopher had almost held his breath lest Ethelberta should discover him at the critical moment to be other than Sol, and mar her deliverance by her alarm. The still silence was anything but silence to him; he felt as if he were listening to the clanging chorus of an oratorio. And then he could fancy he heard words between Ethelberta and the viscount within the room; they were evidently at very close quarters, and dexterity must have been required of her. He went on tiptoe across the gravel to the grass, and once on that he strode in the direction whence he had come. By the thick trunk of one of a group of aged trees he stopped to get a light, just as the Court clock struck six in loud long tones. The transaction had been carried out, through her impatience possibly, four or five minutes before the times appointed.

The note contained, in a shaken hand, in which,

however, the well-known characters were distinguishable, these words in pencil :

‘ At half-past seven o’clock. Just outside the north lodge ; don’t fail.’

This was the time she had suggested to Sol as that which would probably best suit her escape, if she could escape at all. She had changed the place from the west to the north lodge—nothing else. The latter was certainly more secluded, though a trifle more remote from the course of the proposed journey ; there was just time enough and none to spare for fetching the brougham from Lower Lychworth to the lodge, the village being two miles off. The few minutes gained by her readiness at the balcony were useful now. He started at once for the village, diverging somewhat to observe the spot appointed for the meeting. It was excellently chosen ; the gate appeared to be little used, the lane outside it was covered with trees, and all around was silent as the grave. After this hasty survey by the wan starlight, he hastened on to Lower Lychworth.

An hour and a quarter later a little brougham without lamps was creeping along by the park wall towards this spot. The leaves were so thick upon the unfrequented road that the wheels could not be heard, and the horse’s pacing made scarcely more noise than a rabbit would have done in limping along. The vehicle progressed slowly, for they were in good time. About

ten yards from the park entrance it stopped, and Christopher stepped out.

‘We may have to wait here ten minutes,’ he said to the driver. ‘And then shall we be able to reach Anglebury in time for the up mail-train to Southampton?’

‘Half-past seven, half-past eight, half-past nine — two hours. Oh yes, sir, easily. A young lady in the case perhaps, sir?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well, I hope she’ll be done honestly by, even if she is of humble station. ’Tis best, and cheapest too, in the long run.’ The coachman was apparently imagining the dove about to flit away to be one of the pretty maid-servants that abounded in Lychworth Court; such escapades as these were not unfrequent among them, a fair face having been deemed a sufficient recommendation to service therein, without too close an inquiry into character, since the death of the first viscountess.

‘Now then, silence; and listen for a footstep at the gate.’

Such calmness as there was in the musician’s voice had been produced by considerable effort. For his heart had begun to beat fast and loud as he strained his attentive ear to catch the footfall of a woman who could never be his.

The obscurity was as great as a starry sky would permit it to be. Beneath the trees where the carriage stood the darkness was total.

CHAPTER XLIX.

LYCHWORTH AND ITS PRECINCTS—MELCHESTER.

To be wise after the event is often to act foolishly with regard to it; and to preserve the illusion which has led to the event would frequently be a course that omniscience itself could not find fault with. Reaction with Ethelberta was complete, and the more violent in that it threatened to be useless. Sol's bitter chiding had been the first thing to discompose her fortitude. It reduced her to a consciousness that she had allowed herself to be coerced in her instincts without triumphing in her duty. She might have pleased her family better by pleasing her tastes, and have entirely avoided the grim irony of the situation disclosed later in the day.

After the second interview with Sol she was to some extent composed in mind by being able to nurse a definite intention. As momentum causes the narrowest wheel to stand upright, a scheme, fairly imbibed, will give the weakest some power to maintain a position stoically.

In the temporary absence of Lord Mountclere,

about six o'clock, she slipped out upon the balcony and handed down a note. The hour and a half wanting to half-past seven she passed with great effort. The greater part of the time was occupied by dinner, during which she attempted to devise some scheme for leaving him without suspicion just before the appointed moment. Happily, and as if by a Providence, there was no necessity for any such thing. A little while before the half-hour, when she moved to rise from dinner, he also arose, begging her to excuse him for a few minutes, that he might go and write an important note to his lawyer, until that moment forgotten, though the postman was nearly due. She heard him retire along the corridor and shut himself into his study, his promised time of return being a quarter of an hour thence.

Five minutes after that memorable parting Ethelberta came from the little door by the bush of yew, well and thickly wrapped up from head to heels. She skimmed across the park and under the boughs like a shade, mounting then the stone steps for pedestrians which were fixed beside the park gates here, as at all the lodges. Outside and below her she saw an oblong shape—it was a brougham, and it had been drawn forward close to the bottom of the steps that she might not have an inch further to go on foot than to this barrier. The whole precinct was thronged with trees; half their foliage being over head, the other half under foot, for the gardeners had not yet begun to rake and

collect the leaves; thus it was that her dress rustled as she descended the steps.

The carriage door was held open by the driver, and she entered instantly. He shut her in, and mounted to his seat. As they drove away she became conscious of another person inside.

‘Oh! Sol—it is done!’ she whispered, believing the man to be her brother. Her companion made no reply.

Ethelberta, familiar with Sol’s moods of troubled silence, did not press for an answer. It was, indeed, certain that Sol’s assistance would have been given under a sullen protest; even if unwilling to disappoint her, he might well have been silent and angry at her course. They sat in silence, and in total darkness. The road ascended an incline, the horse’s tramp being still deadened by the carpet of leaves. Then the large trees on either hand became interspersed by a low brushwood of varied sorts, from which a large bird occasionally flew, in its affright at their presence beating its wings recklessly against the hard stems with force enough to cripple the delicate quills. It showed how deserted was the spot after nightfall.

‘Sol?’ said Ethelberta again. ‘Why not talk to me?’

She now noticed that her fellow-traveller kept his head and his whole person as snugly back in the corner, out of her way, as it was possible to do. She was not

exactly frightened, but she could not understand the reason. The carriage gave a quick turn, and stopped.

‘Where are we now?’ she said. ‘Shall we get to Anglebury by nine? What is the time, Sol?’

‘I will see,’ replied her companion. They were the first words he had uttered.

The voice was so different from her brother’s that she was terrified; her limbs quivered. In another instant the speaker had struck a wax vesta, and holding it erect in his fingers he looked her in the face.

‘Hee-hee-hee!’ The laughter was her husband the viscount.

He laughed again, and his eyes gleamed like a couple of tarnished brass buttons in the light of the wax match.

Ethelberta might have fallen dead with the shock, so terrible and hideous was it. Yet she did not. She neither shrieked nor fainted; but no poor January fieldfare was ever colder, no ice-house ever more dank with perspiration, than she was then.

‘A very pleasant joke, my dear—hee-hee! And no more than was to be expected on this merry happy day of our lives. Nobody enjoys a good jest more than I do: I always enjoyed a jest—hee-hee! Now we are in the dark again; and we will alight and walk. The path is too narrow for the carriage, but it will not be far for you. Take your husband’s arm.’

While he had been speaking a defiant pride had

sprung up in her, instigating her to conceal every weakness. He had opened the carriage door and stepped out. She followed, taking the offered arm.

‘Take the horse and carriage to the stables,’ said the viscount to the coachman, who was his own servant, the vehicle and horse being also his. The coachman turned the horse’s head and vanished down the woodland track by which they had ascended.

The viscount moved on, uttering private chuckles as numerous as a woodpecker’s taps, and Ethelberta with him. She walked as by a miracle, but she would walk. She would have died rather than not have walked then.

She perceived now that they were somewhere in Lychworth wood. As they went, she noticed a faint gleam upon the ground on the other side of the viscount, which showed her that they were walking beside a wet ditch. She remembered having seen it in the morning: it was a shallow ditch of mud. She might push him in, and run, and so escape before he could extricate himself. It would not hurt him. It was her last chance. She waited a moment for the opportunity.

‘We are one to one, and I am the stronger!’ she at last exclaimed triumphantly, and lifted her hand for a thrust.

‘On the contrary, darling; we are one to half a dozen, and you considerably the weaker,’ he tenderly replied, stepping back adroitly, and blowing a whistle.

At once the bushes seemed to be animated in four or five places.

‘John?’ he said in the direction of one of them.

‘Yes, my lord,’ replied a voice from the bush, and a keeper came forward.

‘William?’

Another man advanced from another bush.

‘Quite right. Remain where you are for the present. Is Tomkins there?’

‘Yes, my lord,’ said a man from another part of the thicket.

‘You go and keep watch by the further lodge: there are poachers about. Where is Strongway?’

‘Just below, my lord.’

‘Tell him and his brother to go to the west gate, and walk up and down. Let them search round it, among the trees inside. Anybody there who cannot give a good account of himself to be brought before me to-morrow morning. I am living at the Cottage at present. That’s all I have to say to you.’ And, turning round to Ethelberta: ‘Now, dearest, we will walk a little further if you are able. I have provided that your friends shall be taken care of.’ He tried to pull her hand towards him, gently, like a cat opening a door.

They walked a little onward, and Lord Mountclere spoke again, with imperturbable good-humour:

‘I will tell you a story, to pass the time away. I

have learnt the art from you—your mantle has fallen upon me, and all your inspiration with it. Listen, dearest. I saw a young man come to the house to-day. Afterwards I saw him cross a passage in your company. You entered the ball-room with him. That room is a treacherous place. It is panelled with wood, and between the panels and the walls are passages for the servants, opening from the room by doors hidden in the woodwork. Lady Mountclere knew of one of these, and made use of it to let out her conspirator; Lord Mountclere knew of another, and made use of it to let in himself. His sight is not good, but his ears are unimpaired. A meeting was arranged to take place at the west gate at half-past seven, unless a note handed from the balcony mentioned another time and place. He heard it all—hee-hee!

‘When Lady Mountclere’s confederate came for the note, I was in waiting above, and handed one down a few minutes before the hour struck, confirming the time, but changing the place. When Lady Mountclere handed down her note, just as the clock was striking, her confederate had gone, and I was standing beneath the balcony to receive it. She dropped it into her husband’s hands—ho-ho-ho-ho!

‘Lord Mountclere ordered a brougham to be at the west lodge, as fixed by Lady Mountclere’s note. Probably Lady Mountclere’s friend ordered a brougham to be at the north gate, as fixed by my note, written in

imitation of Lady Mountclere's hand. Lady Mountclere came to the spot she had mentioned, and like a good wife rushed into the arms of her husband—hoo-hoo-hoo-hoo-hoo!

As if by an ungovernable impulse, Ethelberta broke into laughter also—laughter which had a wild unnatural sound; it was hysterical. She sank down upon the leaves, and there continued the fearful laugh just as before. Lord Mountclere became greatly frightened. The spot they had reached was a green space within a girdle of hollies, and in front of them rose an ornamental cottage. This was the building which Ethelberta had visited earlier in the day: to be short, it was the Petit Trianon of Lychworth Court.

The viscount left her side, and hurried forward. The door of the building was opened by a woman.

‘Have you prepared for us, as I directed?’

‘Yes, my lord; tea and coffee are both ready.’

‘Never mind that now. Lady Mountclere is ill; come and assist her indoors. Tell the other woman to bring wine and water at once.’

He returned to Ethelberta. She was better, and was sitting calmly on the bank. She rose without assistance.

‘You may retire,’ he said to the woman who had followed him, and she turned round. When Ethelberta saw the building, she drew back quickly.

‘Where is the *other* Lady Mountclere?’ she inquired.

‘Gone!’

‘She shall never return—never?’

‘Never. It was not intended that she should.’

‘That sounds well. Lord Mountclere, we may as well compromise matters.’

‘I think so, too. It becomes a lady to make a virtue of a necessity.’

‘It was stratagem against stratagem. Mine was ingenious; yours was masterly. Accept my acknowledgment. We will enter upon an armed neutrality.’

‘No. Let me be your adorer and slave again, as ever. Your beauty, dearest, covers everything! You are my mistress and queen! But here we are at the door. Tea is prepared for us here. I have a liking for life in this cottage mode, and live here on occasion. Women, attend to Lady Mountclere.’

The woman who had seen Ethelberta in the morning was alarmed at recognising her, having since been informed officially of the marriage: she murmured entreaties for pardon. They assisted the viscountess to a chair, the door was closed, and the wind blew past as if nobody had ever stood there to interrupt its flight.

Full of misgivings, Christopher continued to wait at the north gate. Half-past seven had long since been past, and no Ethelberta had appeared. He did not

for the moment suppose the delay to be hers, and this gave him patience ; having taken up the position, he was induced by fidelity to abide by the consequences. It would be only a journey of two hours to reach Anglebury Station ; he would ride outside with the driver, put her into the train, and bid her adieu for ever. She had cried for help, and he had heard her cry.

At last through the trees came the sound of the Court clock striking eight, and then, for the first time, a doubt arose in his mind whether she could have mistaken the gate. Sol had distinctly told him the west lodge ; her note had expressed the north lodge. Could she by any accident have written one thing while meaning another ? He entered the carriage, and drove round to the west gate. All was as silent there as at the other, the meeting between Ethelberta and Lord Mountclere being then long past ; and he drove back again.

He left the carriage, and entered the park on foot, approaching the house slowly. All was silent ; the windows were dark ; moping sounds came from the trees and sky, as from Sorrow whispering to Night. By this time he felt assured that the scheme had miscarried. While he stood here a carriage without lights came up the drive ; it turned in towards the stable-yard without going to the door. The carriage had plainly been empty.

Returning across the grass by the way he had

come, he was startled by the voices of two men from the road hard by.

‘Have ye seed anybody?’

‘Not a soul.’

‘Shall we go across again?’

‘What’s the good? let’s home to supper.’

‘My lord must have heard somebody, or ’a wouldn’t have said it.’

‘Perhaps he’s nervous now he’s living in the Cottage again. I thought that fancy was over. Well, I’m glad ’tis a young wife he’s brought us. She’ll have her routs and her rackets as well as the high-born ones, you’ll see, as soon as she gets used to the place.’

‘She must be a queer Christian to pick up with him.’

‘Well, if she’ve Christian charity ’tis enough for we poor men; her faith and hope may be as please God. Now I be for on-along homeward.’

As soon as they had gone Christopher moved from his hiding, and, avoiding the gravel-walk, returned to his coachman, telling him to drive at once to Anglebury.

Julian was so impatient of the futility of his adventure that he wished to annihilate its existence. On reaching Anglebury he determined to get on at once to Melchester, that the event of the night might be summarily ended; to be still in the neighbourhood

was to be still engaged in it. He reached home before midnight.

Walking into their house in High Street, as dissatisfied with himself as a man well could be who still retained health and an occupation, he found Faith sitting up as usual. His news was simple: the marriage had taken place before he could get there, and he had seen nothing of either ceremony or viscountess. The remainder he reserved for a more convenient season.

Faith looked anxiously at him as he ate supper, smiling now and then.

‘Well, I am tired of this life,’ said Christopher.

‘So am I,’ said Faith. ‘Ah, if we were only rich!’

‘Ah, yes.’

‘Or if we were not rich,’ she said, turning her eyes to the fire. ‘If we were only slightly provided for, it would be better than nothing. How much would you be content with, Kit?’

‘As much as I could get.’

‘Would you be content with a thousand a year for both of us?’

‘I daresay I should,’ he murmured, breaking his bread.

‘Or five hundred for both?’

‘Or five hundred.’

‘Or even three hundred?’

‘Bother three hundred. Less than double the sum

would not satisfy me. We may as well imagine much as little.'

Faith's countenance had fallen. 'O Kit,' she said, 'you always disappoint me.'

'I do. How do I disappoint you this time?'

'By not caring for three hundred a year—a hundred and fifty each—when that is all I have to offer you.'

'Faith!' said he, looking up for the first time. Her soft eyes were curiously turned upon him.

'It is true, and I had prepared such a pleasant surprise for you, and now you don't care! Our cousin Lucy did leave us something after all. I don't understand the exact total sum, but it comes to a hundred and fifty a year each—more than I expected, though not so much as you deserved. Here's the letter. I have been dwelling upon it all day, and thinking what a pleasure it would be; and it is not after all!'

'Good gracious, Faith, I was only supposing. The real thing is another matter altogether. Well, the idea of Lucy's will containing our names. I am sure I would have gone to the funeral had I known.'

'I wish it were a thousand!'

'O no—it doesn't matter at all. But, certainly, three hundred for two is a tantalising sum: not enough to enable us to change our condition, and enough to make us dissatisfied with going on as we are.'

'We must forget we have it, and let it increase.'

‘It isn’t enough to increase much. We may as well use it. But how? Take a bigger house—what’s the use? Give up the organ?—then I shall be rather worse off than I am at present. Positively, it is the most provoking amount anybody could have invented had they tried ever so long. Poor Lucy, to do that, and not even to come near us when father died. . . . Ah, I know what we’ll do. We’ll go abroad—we’ll live in Italy.’

SEQUEL.

ANGLEBURY—LYCHWORTH—SANDBOURNE.

Two years and a half after the marriage of Ethelberta, and the evening adventures which followed it, a man young in years, though considerably older in mood and expression, walked up to the 'Old Fox' Inn at Anglebury. The anachronism sat not unbecomingly upon him, and the voice was precisely that of the Christopher Julian of heretofore. His way of entering the inn and calling for a conveyance was more offhand than formerly; he was much less afraid of the sound of his own voice now than when he had gone through the same performance on a certain chill evening the last time that he visited the spot. He wanted to be taken to Knollsea to meet the steamer there, and was not coming back by the same vehicle.

It was a very different day from that of his previous journey along the same road; different in season; different in weather; and the humour of the observer differed yet more widely from its condition than did the landscape from its former hues. In due time they reached a commanding situation upon the road,

from which were visible knots and plantations of trees on the Lychworth manor. Christopher broke the silence.

‘Lord Mountclere is still alive and well, I am told?’

‘Oh, ay. He’ll live to be a hundred. Never such a change as has come over the man of late years.’

‘Indeed!’

‘Oh, ’tis my lady. She’s a one to put up with! Still, ’tis said here and there that marrying her was the best day’s work that he ever did in his life, although she’s got to be my lord and my lady both.’

‘Is she happy with him?’

‘She is very sharp with the pore man—about happy I don’t know. He was a good-natured old man, for all his sins, and would sooner any day lay out money in new presents than pay it in old debts. But ’tis altered now. ’Tisn’t the same place. Ah, in the old times I have seen the floor of the servants’ hall over the vamp of your boot in solid beer that we had poured aside from the horns because we couldn’t see straight enough to pour it in. See? No, we couldn’t see a hole in a ladder. And now, even at Christmas or Whitsuntide, when a man, if ever he desires to be overcome with a drop, would naturally wish it to be, you can walk out of Lychworth as straight as you walked in. All her doings.’

‘Then she holds the reins?’

‘She do! There was a little tussle at first; but

how could a old man hold his own against such a spry young body as that ! She threatened to run away from him, and kicked up Bob's-a-dying, and I don't know what all ; and being the woman, of course she was sure to beat in the long run. Pore old nobleman, she marches him off to church every Sunday as regular as a clock, makes him read family prayers that haven't been read in Lychworth for the last thirty years to my certain knowledge, and keeps him down to three glasses of wine a day, strict, so that you never see him any the more generous for liquor or a bit elevated at all, as it used to be. There, 'tis true, it has done him good in one sense, for they say he'd have been dead in five years if he had gone on as he was going.'

‘ So that she's a good wife to him, after all ? ’

‘ Well, if she had been a little worse 'twould have been a little better for him in one sense, for he would have had his own way more. But he was a curious feller at one time, as we all know, and I suppose 'tis as much as he can expect ; but 'tis a strange reverse for him. It is said that when he's asked out to dine, or to anything in the way of a jaunt, his eye flies across to hers afore he answers : and if her eye says yes, he says yes ; and if her eye says no, he says no. 'Tis a sad condition for one who ruled womankind as he, that a woman should lead him in a string whether he will or no.’

‘ Sad indeed ! ’

‘She’s steward, and agent, and everything. She has got a room called ‘my lady’s office,’ and great ledgers and cash-books you never see the like. In old times there were bailiffs to look after the workfolk, foremen to look after the tradesmen, a building-steward to look after the foremen, a land-steward to look after the building-steward, and a dashing grand agent to look after the land-steward: fine times they had then, I assure ye. My lady said they were eating out the property like a honeycomb, and then there was a terrible row. Half of ’em were sent flying; and now there’s only the agent, and the viscountess, and a sort of surveyor man, and of the three she does most work so ’tis said. She marks the trees to be felled, settles what horses are to be sold and bought, and is out in all winds and weathers. There, if somebody hadn’t looked into things ’twould soon have been all up with his lordship, he was so very extravagant. In one sense ’twas lucky for him that she was born in humble life, because owing to it she knows the ins and outs of contriving, which he never did.’

‘Then a man on the verge of bankruptcy will do better to marry a poor and sensible wife than a rich and stupid one. Well, here we are at the tenth milestone. I will walk the remainder of the distance to Knollsea, as there is ample time for meeting the last steamboat.’

When the man was gone Christopher proceeded

slowly on foot down the hill, and reached that part of the highway at which he had stopped in the cold November breeze waiting for a woman who never came. He was older now, and he had ceased to wish that he had not been disappointed. There was the lodge, and around it were the trees, brilliant in the shining greens of June. Every twig sustained its bird, and every blossom its bee. The roadside was not muffled in a garment of dead leaves as it had been then, and the lodge-gate was not open as it always used to be. He paused to look through the bars. The drive was well kept and gravelled; the grass edgings, formerly marked by hoofs and ruts, and otherwise trodden away, were now green and luxuriant, bent sticks being placed at intervals as a protection.

While he looked through the gate a woman stepped from the lodge to open it. In her haste she nearly swung the gate into his face, and would have completely done so had he not jumped back.

‘I beg pardon, sir,’ she said, on perceiving him. ‘I was going to open it for my lady, and I didn’t see you.’

Christopher moved round the corner. The perpetual snubbing that he had received from Ethelberta ever since he had known her seemed about to be continued through the medium of her dependents.

A trotting, accompanied by the sound of light wheels, had become perceptible; and then a vehicle

came through the gate, and turned up the road which he had come down. He saw the back of a basket-carriage, drawn by a pair of piebald ponies. A lad in livery sat behind with folded arms; the driver was a lady. He saw her bonnet, her shoulders, her hair—but no more. She lessened in his gaze, and was soon out of sight.

He stood a long time thinking; but he did not wish her his.

In this wholesome frame of mind he proceeded on his way, thankful that he had escaped meeting her, though so narrowly. But perhaps at this remote season the embarrassment of a rencounter would not have been intense. At Knollsea he entered the steamer for Sandbourne.

Mr. Chickerel and his family now lived at Firtop Villa, in that place, a house which, like many others, had been built since Julian's last visit to the town. He was directed to the outskirts, and into a fir plantation where drives and intersecting roads had been laid out, and where new villas had sprung up like mushrooms. He entered by a swing gate, on which 'Firtop' was painted, and a maid-servant showed him into a neatly-furnished room, containing Mr. Chickerel, Mrs. Chickerel, and Picotee, the matron being reclined on a couch, which improved health had permitted her to substitute for a bed.

He had been expected, and all were glad to see



SHE LESSEMED IN HIS GAZE, AND WAS SOON OUT OF SIGHT.

again the sojourner in foreign lands, even down to the ladylike tabby, who was all purr and warmth towards him except when she was all claws and nippers. But had the prime sentiment of the meeting shown itself it would have been the unqualified surprise of Christopher at seeing how much Picotee's face had grown to resemble her sister's: it was less a resemblance in contours than in expression and tone.

They had an early tea, and then Mr. Chickerel, sitting in a patriarchal chair, conversed pleasantly with his guest, being well acquainted with him through other members of the family. They talked of Julian's residence at different Italian towns with his sister; of Faith, who was at the present moment staying with some old friends in Melchester; and, as was inevitable, the discourse hovered over and settled upon Ethelberta, the prime ruler of the courses of them all, with little exception, through recent years.

'It was a hard struggle for her,' said Chickerel, looking reflectively out at the fir trees. 'I never thought the girl would have got through it. When she first entered the house everybody was against her. She had to fight a whole host of them single-handed. There was the viscount's brother, other relations, lawyers, ladies, servants, not one of them was her friend; and not one who wouldn't rather have seen her arrive there in evil relationship with him than as she did come. But she stood her ground. She was

put upon her mettle; and one by one they got to feel there was somebody among them whose little finger, if they insulted her, was thicker than a Mountclere's loins. She must have had a will of iron; it was a situation that would have broken the hearts of a dozen ordinary women, for everybody soon knew that we were of no family, and that's what made it so hard for her. But there she is as mistress now, and everybody respecting her. I sometimes fancy she is occasionally too severe with the servants, and I know what service is. But she says it is necessary, owing to her birth; and perhaps she is right.'

'I suppose she often comes to see you?'

'Four or five times a year,' said Picotee.

'She cannot come quite so often as she would,' said Mrs. Chickerel, 'because of her lofty position, which has its juties. Well, as I always say, Berta doesn't take after me. I couldn't have married the man even though he did bring a coronet with him.'

'I shouldn't have cared to let him ask ye,' said Chickerel. 'However, that's neither here nor there—all ended better than I expected. He's fond of her.'

'And it is wonderful what can be done with an old man when you are his darling,' said Mrs. Chickerel.

'If I were Berta I should go to London oftener,' said Picotee, to turn the conversation. 'But she lives mostly in the library. And, oh, what do you think?'

She is writing an epic poem, and employs Emmeline as her reader.'

'Dear me. And how are Sol and Dan? You mentioned them once in your letters,' said Christopher.

'Berta has set them up as builders in London.'

'She bought a business for them,' said Chickerel. 'But Sol wouldn't accept her help for a long time, and now he has only agreed to it on condition of paying her back the money with interest, which he is doing. They have just signed a contract to build a hospital for twenty thousand pounds.'

Picotee broke in—'You knew that both Gwendoline and Cornelia married two years ago, and went to Queensland? They married two brothers, who were farmers, and left England the following week. Georgie and Myrtle are at school.'

'And Joey?'

'We are thinking of making Joseph a parson,' said Mrs. Chickerel.

'Indeed! a parson.'

'Yes; 'tis a genteel living for the boy. And he's talents that way. Since he has been under masters he knows all the strange sounds the old Romans and Greeks used to make by way of talking, and the love stories of the ancient women as if they were his own. I assure you, Mr. Julian, if you could hear how beautiful the boy tells about little Cupid with his bow and arrows, and the rows between that pagan apostle Jupiter and

his wife because of another woman, and the handsome young gods who kissed Venus, you'd say he deserved to be made a bishop at once !'

The evening advanced, and they walked in the garden. Here, by some means, Picotee and Christopher found themselves alone.

'Your letters to my sister have been charming,' said Christopher. 'And so regular, too. It was as good as a birthday every time one arrived.'

Picotee blushed and said nothing.

Christopher had full assurance that her heart was where it always had been. A suspicion of the fact had been the reason of his visit here to-day.

'Other letters were once written from England to Italy, and they acquired great celebrity. Do you know whose?'

'Walpole's?' said Picotee, timidly.

'Yes; but they never charmed me half as much as yours. You may rest assured that one person in the world thinks Walpole your second.'

'You should not have read them; they were not written to you. But I suppose you wished to hear of Ethelberta?'

'At first I did,' said Christopher. 'But, oddly enough, I got more interested in the writer than in her news. I don't know if ever before there has been an instance of loving by means of letters; if not, it is

because there have never been such sweet ones written. At last I looked for them more anxiously than Faith.'

'You see, you knew me before.' Picotee would have withdrawn this remark if she could, fearing that it seemed like a suggestion of her love long ago.

'Then, on my return, I thought I would just call and see you, and go away and think what would be best for me to do with a view to the future. But since I have been here I have felt that I could not go away to think without first asking you what you think on one point—whether you could ever marry me?'

'I thought you would ask that when I first saw you.'

'Did you. Why?'

'You looked at me as if you would.'

'Well,' continued Christopher, 'the worst of it is I am as poor as Job. Faith and I have three hundred a year between us, but only half is mine. So that before I get your promise I must let your father know how poor I am. Besides what I mention, I have only my earnings by music. But I am to be installed as chief organist at Melchester soon, instead of deputy, as I used to be; which is something.'

'I am to have five hundred pounds when I marry. That was Lord Mountclere's arrangement with Ethelberta. He is extremely anxious that I should marry well.'

‘That’s unfortunate. A marriage with me will hardly be considered well.’

‘Oh, yes, it will,’ said Picotee, quickly, and then looked frightened.

Christopher drew her towards him, and imprinted a kiss upon her cheek, at which Picotee was not so wretched as she had been some years before when he mistook her for another in that performance.

‘Berta will never let us come to want,’ she said with vivacity, when she had recovered. ‘She always gives me what is necessary.’

‘We will endeavour not to trouble her,’ said Christopher, amused by Picotee’s utter dependence now as ever upon her sister, as upon an eternal Providence. ‘However, it is well to be kin to a coach though you never ride in it. Now, shall we go indoors to your father? You think he will not object?’

‘I think he will be very glad,’ replied Picotee, ‘Berta will, I know.’

THE END.





